

by Isabel Nash

WHERE DID TUFFY HIDE?
(with Frederick Eberstadt)

THE BANQUET VANISHES

The Banquet Vanishes

*The
Banquet Vanishes*

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For Fred — because some of the jokes are his

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Chapter One

I ARRIVED ON the island of Pinta with a new name — Billy Axel. It is perhaps best to begin with a name — not a real name in this case, for during the months I lived in the islands my real name carried on a slender documentary existence in New York — but a token name, a spurious name, even a doubly spurious name, since each new name which I flourished, each new name which seemed to come so facilely to my lips in the course of many self-introductions, has in the past year associated itself with some submerged original — a trumpet player, a minor league catcher, a Trollopian M.P. — all but that final name, Billy Axel. I have not yet been able to

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regurgitate the model for that name. There is even a chance that it is not counterfeit. But in any case, since a name is a necessary preface, the presupposition of possession, and the shadow of the substance if not the substance of the shadow, I hand you now this passport to existence, this Billy Axel. The face is similar.

As well as a new name, I had a certain amount of money, a modicum of clothing, and a notebook full of unlined paper. This notebook I was jealous of as tangible proof of my new existence. I had introduced it alternately as the sketchbook of an artist and the notebook of a writer. Although occasionally I had dreams in color, I was proficient neither as a draftsman nor as a colorist. While my prose was scarcely more deserving, I had found it on the whole safer to be a writer, as most people found this discovery a terminal point and there was less demand for visible proof of my occupation. So I came to Pinta as the writer Billy Axel. To prepare myself I wrote, ostentatiously, all the way over in the boat. I wrote by a rather unrewarding technique of free association, interested only in the activity; but I was pleased to observe that by the time we sighted Pinta, I had covered four pages with close script, as well as obtaining some little attention from my fellow passengers. I read over my notes and was disappointed to find that for the most part they consisted only of my new name written over and over again in varying hands, with occasional interpolation from the steady strum of the navigator's conversation with the captain. Later I threw this all away. I started trying to erase it, for I felt that my notebook

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was beginning to look a little depleted after six weeks of this kind of disposal, but I found the job too demanding.

Pinta has fallen since into the hands of so many copy writers that I need hardly attempt to re-create it here. It seemed to me very much like all the other Caribbean islands I had visited; but then, despite my pretensions, I was signally unobservant. There was the insistent sibilance of wind in the palm trees. There were the chickens in the street, the children in the street, the stalls in the street, the few antediluvian cars in the street, the red dust in the street — for the street was after all not a street but a road, a dirt road. There was the sound of a scratch band somewhere — and, suddenly emulsified from the noises of existence, the flat funereal sound of a pistol from far away repeated over and over again in the mournful rhythm of waves. Then there was a tackle store, a post office, a bar, nobly called the Trocadero, and I was before the inn to which I had been directed — the Crooked Mile.

The Crooked Mile was an unprepossessing pink stucco building sprawled on a double flight of stairs. The fabled eccentricities of the proprietress were, disappointingly enough, not manifest, unless in the gaudy fuchsia of the picket fence surrounding the house. There was a durable-looking little boy with a very dirty face and blond bangs sitting in front of the gate and moving some Coca-Cola bottles purposefully back and forth in one of the secretive games of childhood.

"Is this the Crooked Mile?" I asked him, hoping that he would then understand my direction and remove himself vol-

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untarily from my path without forcing me to disturb his ritual. Since I was facing a large placard bearing the name, he gave me the contemptuous look this question deserved. I felt called upon to bolster my original offensive by repeating my query with a difference. "*Est-ce que c'est le Crooked Mile, celui-ci?*" The boy spoke no tongue but moved backwards a quarter of an inch, and acknowledging the concession, I edged by him, carefully clearing the bottles.

After a galaxy of steps — crumbling, creaking, and misformed — I reached a screen door which rang in a dozen tones of bells before it emptied me, blinded by dimness, into the vestibule of the Crooked Mile. I was conscious, as always when eyeless, first of the smell of the place — in this case a curious moist, earthy smell spiced with herbs, a bit of catacombs and a bit of kitchen. Then after muting the outlines of a tall Negro woman, who asked me gently, "You come for dinner, sir?" my eyes strained into focus.

"*Non, non,*" I said, triumphantly bilingual after my encounter with the little boy outside, and then remembering the language of her question, retrenched more comfortably into English. "I have a reservation. My name is Billy Axel." The woman, still smiling tentatively, backed away from me murmuring, "Reservation? Well, I don' know. I must ask Madame Bowers." She had reached a long yellow silk curtain hung with golden beads, and sensing rather than touching an opening, slid through it. The curtain folded together and there was no ripple to show that I had not always been alone.

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As I waited, I could hear the house shifting. Faint English syllables blended with the mellifluous singsong of native voices, and I realized that I had tonic if disembodied fellow guests. In a moment my courier slit the yellow curtains and told me that if I pleased I could follow her. Madame Bowers would see me. The corridor down which she guided me was very dark indeed and very dank, and I felt intimidated, as if I were at the mouth of a lair. The smell of musk grew, and finally, when the Negro woman knocked timidly on a half-open door, whispering, "*Madame, il attend dehors,*" I was almost overcome by the odor.

"*Entrez, entrez,*" said a deep rusty voice, and I was emptied into Rosella Bowers's apartment. The sun filtered in through violet shades onto walls covered from ceiling to floorboard with pictures — picture post cards, photographs framed and unframed, inscribed and uninscribed, newspaper clippings, recipes, travel posters, every conceivable shape the camera could take in or typography record. There were pictures within pictures and superimposed on pictures, and clippings underlined in red, green, and purple starting out from the walls — a proofreader's nightmare — and more rose like their seed from the floor. Letters, pictures, clippings carpeting the floor, growing up the back of the peacock chair, snowing on the multitude of feather boas that lay garishly serpentine on the ottoman.

"*Eh bien, eh bien,*" said the voice impatiently, and what I had thought to be a stockpile of scarves on the chaise longue heaved to emit a huge pale freckled arm waving a fungoid

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hand. The lavender light filtered cruelly onto Rosella Bowers, mistress of a bygone king. The motes flittered down over her and settled down over her, covering her with violet dust and making her look like an ancient, exotic potpourri. Above the scarves, the block of her head and neck rose massive, fleshy, strangely virile — the face of a fine old general demobbed twenty years since — under a ridiculous crinkled doll's wig of hair.

She broke briskly into my contemplation.

"Que faites-vous ici? Que voulez-vous?"

"J'ai vous écrit de Charlottetown, Madame Bowers," I managed.

"Vous n'êtes pas français?"

"Non, madame. Je suis américain."

"In that case, young man, it might be less affected if you spoke your native tongue and simply called me Miss Bowers. Or Mrs. Bowers if you prefer. Many people do, although I have never married."

She regarded me sternly from under eyebrows of fat, fingering an ivory cigarette holder with one hand, with the other stroking the third strand of a necklace of pearls — pearls so out-size, so flamboyant, so lustrous, that I knew they must be the famous King Ludovic pearls of which I had heard in Charlottetown.

I didn't know quite what reply this required, so I muttered, "Yes, that might be easier."

"Marie Louise tells me you have a reservation."

"Well, not exactly."

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"I thought not. I cannot recall making any reservation for you."

"I wrote ten days ago from Charlottetown saying that I was coming. I hoped that you would hold a room for me."

"Well, that's too bad. I never make reservations without an introduction. You might try the Hôtel de l'Europe. It is on the square — you can't miss it. I am told it is not too bad — *pas convenable peut-être*, but not too bad."

I was crushed by her summary rejection. I had not even had a chance to parade my new name and adopted profession. It was certainly not an opportune moment to introduce myself, and I was afraid her shrewd old eyes might strip my pretensions from me, leaving me anonymous and naked. I grasped rather at a bona fide name.

"In my letter I said that Commissioner Bulgade had recommended me. I mean he is the nephew of the Countess of Whitemarsh, who he said was a friend of yours."

"Oh, good Lord, yes. Sit down, sit down. As a matter of fact, I only got your letter last evening. Anyway, it's no good answering letters down here. Takes a year and a day. No mail service at all. It's the beastly French Colonials. Oh, do sit down, dear boy, and stop fidgeting."

I was stirred by her voice of command, but at a loss as to where to sit. The furniture was all uninhabitable and even dangerous. There were vitrines filled with imitation cut crystal and Kewpie dolls. There were brass urns blossoming strangely with pampas grass and peacock feathers. A heavy mahogany table, the only sturdy object in the room, was sur-

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mounted by a cover glass oppressing a scene which might have been an early Flemish depiction of purgatory, but that the demons and tortured souls were replaced by a profusion of winsome puppy dogs and coy Victorian maidens, evidently cut with care from greeting cards and the more inoffensive brand of institutional calendar. I was not particularly gallant, but I felt that I simply could not sit on top of all those smirking ladies. In one bold move, I nudged an ostrich feather fan from a gilt vanity stool with one buttock and sat tentatively.

"I have your letter right here," she continued, starting to dismember an untidy stack of papers on the table next to her. Almost half of these fell to the floor before she gave up.

"Fancy your knowing Constance. I thought she had died years ago."

"I don't know her," I said, not succeeding in interrupting her. "I only know her nephew, the commissioner."

"She was a terrible tart, you know — not just a figure of speech — a real tart. I always say she was the first person I met when I came down to London. You see I was an orphan and I had to make my own way. In those days, if you won't think me too vain, I was very beautiful. Indeed everybody said so, and it was true. Max Beerbohm said that Maxine Elliott and I were the two most beautiful women ever to grace a stage — and as she was old enough to be my mother, I had rather an edge. So I went on the stage — and very successfully, too. At any rate, the first rooms I took were in Shepherd Market, though I was only a girl — just turned seventeen — and I had no idea what the wares were in that market. A year

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or two later I married the younger son of the Duke of Cheshire. The old duke adored me, and to make up to me for not inheriting the fortune, he gave me these pearls. Well, my husband and I were in Monte when a lady came up to me and asked if I wasn't English, and I said indeed I was. So she said she had noticed my pearls and admired them, and she was sure she recognized me but she couldn't think from where. Well, then she introduced herself as the Countess of Whitemarsh. Why, my dear, I just burst out laughing. Do you know why? Because then I recognized her all in a flash. I used to see her plying her trade in Shepherd Market when I came home from the theater. Do you know, I haven't told a soul from that day to this. Well, it certainly is a small world, as they say."

"That certainly is a strange story," I said with sincerity.

"So Constance isn't dead. I thought she died years ago. I'm very glad indeed, because I used to sit here sometimes and wonder what poor Constance had died of."

I was loath by this time to tell her that I was merely an acquaintance of Commissioner Bulgade's and had never seen his aunt, that indeed I had never even heard of her until he mentioned her. I understood from him that she had died the previous spring of uremic poisoning, but I felt that any people I might translate would be of too petty a stature to be visible in Mrs. Bowers's landscape. I might say that the Countess of Whitemarsh had been felled by a brick from the groining of Westminster Abbey while attending the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, but it occurred to me that this would receive but

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fragmentary attention. The people who counted were the formidable figures on the wall — the leggy girls laughing on the beach at Menton, the white-flanneled young men in the summerhouse, the bearded gentleman in the blazer waving from a yacht . . . The Countess of Whitemarsh who died in Oxfordshire was only a shadow of the Countess of Whitemarsh eternally transfixed by a thumbtack to the violet wall.

"I wonder," I began again rather tentatively, "about a room."

"Yes, of course, my poor boy — a room. You catch me in a dreadful predicament. I'm really quite full up. You see, I have three American ladies — and Colonel and Mrs. Bagby, and this representative of the Intercolonial Export. But the real difficulty is that I am expecting the Comtesse de Vacluse any day and she will certainly need three rooms and maybe more. I suppose I could give you a room until she comes, and then, if one of the American ladies or Intercolonial leaves, I could pop you in there. As a matter of fact, you may be a blessing in disguise . . . Do you know la comtesse?"

"No," I replied. "I don't think so."

"Don't think so! Well, rest assured then, young man, you do not. Ah, *che bella, che bella*. She is probably the most beautiful woman in France, not to say one of the richest. Before she was married, she was supposed to be the most beautiful white woman in the Caribbean — which is the same thing as being the most beautiful woman down here, as far as I am concerned. I've never fancied these dusky skins. As a matter of fact, many, many years ago — before you were born,

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I dare say — the Maharajah of Rankoohr was very taken with me — but that's another story. Anyway, when I first came to the islands, Eliane was just a little girl and when she was sent over to the convent, I gave her a letter to my old friend the Marquise de Gondeffleur. Well, she introduced Eliane to Monsieur le Comte and to make a long story short, they were married. Such a brilliant, brilliant man he was — one of the richest in France — fantastic wealth and so *distingué*. What a tragedy that such a god among men should be taken from us! Have you ever traveled on the Continent?"

"Yes, I went to Europe the summer I was sixteen."

"But of course, Americans never travel. As my old friend Sir Dexter Wildecker said to me once, 'Americans never travel. They are just Sunday trippers with no Sabbath.' Oh, he was such an amusing old man. I must say I never understand my Americans. Sometimes they fly in here and fly out again before the dust has a chance to settle, so to speak. Do you know by any chance a Miss Ada Lee?"

"Miss Ada Lee?"

"Oh, don't look so guilty, my young friend. Not a personal question, I assure you. She must be old enough to be your mother. She comes from your South and she tells me that she is the last word in American refinement. How she runs down my two other American ladies. They are so jolly and they pay up their accounts right away, and no fuss, too. But Miss Ada Lee — she expresses her refinement by complaints and demands. Is that the custom in the United States? How I should like to put you in *her* room! Not that it's such a

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nice room, but how I should like to see the last of her. When she first came here she bothered and teased and nothing would do but she must have a lock on her door. Well, of course, I thought she was afraid someone would wander in and see that she had nothing to her name but two crepy dresses and that tawdry opal brooch. And God knows what her underwear looks like — if she has any, I mean. But then it turns out much to my surprise — and I am a woman of the world, mind you — that she has this fat paramour. You won't believe it when you see him — a great white whale of a man, who pretends to live at the de l'Europe. He calls himself Dickie-Bird or some such name — Moby Dickie-Bird, I call him. I must say when a paramour gets to be that fat, he must be a parasite. Oh, my word! A double pun."

For the first time in her recitation, Rosella Bowers laughed, a long and complicated laugh. First she produced from one of the secret pockets in her face a hole which must once have been a dimple. Then there was a rumble in her diaphragm and a shaking of her bosom. The rumble, moving upward, became almost a girlish trill, then it wheezed away, ending with a sort of sigh — a sigh of pleasure and relief, and amiable world-weariness. Her eyes hooded over and she sank back against the arc of the chaise longue. For a few seconds her fingers were animate on her pearls and then they were quiet. The pearls continued to gleam resolutely in the darkened room. I was suddenly ashamed of the hemmed and tucked neck on which they lay, unable to elicit from this scaffold of flesh the beauty of an age. I tried to picture her

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fleeing from the mansion in Park Lane to the house in St. Tropez to the flat off the Via Veneto to the cottage in Tenerife to this spider web of a room, full of viscous smells and empty faces, where she was no longer pursued but barked like a sad Daphne in flesh.

For many minutes there had been no sound but her stertorous breathing and I began to wonder if she might not have had a stroke. Ignobly, I was contemplating flight when she gave a little start and said, "What was I saying? Well, no matter. You have kept me talking here too long. It is time for my tisane." She shook heartily on a bronze camel bell by her side, at the same time roaring, "Marie Louise! Marie Louise!" The syllables still filled the room as Marie Louise moved out of the wall of faces bearing a tray full of crackers and an urn emitting a most fragrant steam. She set it down with a kind of low curtsy. Feeling that our interview must be at an end, as well as experiencing a mild revulsion at the idea of watching Rosella Bowers eat, I said, "Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Bowers. I don't want to interrupt your meal, so I guess if you could just tell me what room . . ."

Through a mouthful of crackers, Mrs. Bowers said, "Call this a meal, young man? But, of course, I suppose you live on sandwiches like all Americans. I myself never eat a thing. I haven't for years. And I never touch a drop but water and tea." She paused to take a long inhalation of the tisane. Then she turned to the colored woman who was standing on her left and emitted a stream of French too rapid for me to understand. Remembering me, she added, "I told Marie Louise

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that you are the nephew of one of my oldest friends, so she will take the greatest care of you. She is going to put you in the room across from Miss Lee. Not very cheerful, that, but I am afraid it will have to do for the time being." And Rosella Bowers sank into her steam and crackers.

A little affronted by her assumption that I spoke no French, I made my exit fighting an irritating impulse to back out like Marie Louise. I followed the woman up two flights of stairs and down a corridor until she hesitated before a door, indicating that I precede her. "If you please, sir."

The room consisted mostly of a large brass bed, though there were also a desk, a bureau, a wicker chair, and two pictures — one a tinted photograph of the late King Edward at Ascot, the other a colored print of a lady in the immodest garb of the Georgian era, holding a stuffed pigeon and pouting over a large basket of fruit. "Who'll buy my cherries?" read the caption below. A flowered curtain hanging from a shelf seemed to serve as a closet, and a huge light bulb swinging over the bed appeared to constitute the sole illumination for the room. This was evidently not part of the Countess's suite. Marie Louise glanced delicately at my dirty knapsack and inquired if she could unpack for me. I did not know her well enough to discern whether this was manners or malice, but I declined her offer.

Once alone I unpacked my few belongings and assigned them to different portions of the furniture and floor. My packing and unpacking had become easier with each successive stopover. I had left a curious trail of possessions between

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New York and Pinta. Unlike most treasure hunts, the treasure in this case was at the beginning — an eighteen-carat diamond pendant my mother had bequeathed me for some nebulous bride. It was lying now in a Seventh Avenue hock shop. After that there were a couple of shirts, a pair of sneakers, and a copy of *Crime and Punishment* in Havana; a pair of blue gabardine bathing trunks in Port au Prince; a cotton bathrobe, a stud box, and a paper-backed edition of *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* in Christiansted; a pair of silk pajamas and the *Age of Surrealism* in Basse-Terre. Each island hotel held an unrewarding souvenir of my visit — until here on Pinta, here at the end of the trail, I had only a few changes of clothing, some papers, a life.

I regretted the loss of none of my possessions. I knew that the pendant had brought much less than its value, but then I had received so much more for it than I needed for my escape. I had experienced, to my own wonder, a slight reluctance to sell it — why, I did not know, since I had buried my name and the bulk of its worldly possessions in New York and desired never to return to that grave. It was not out of consideration for my older brothers George and Rit — I had no intention of communicating with them. Perhaps it was simply because I had met with a pawnshop before I had come upon a place to sell the pendant. I still had the ticket to show that I had once had another life. At least I thought I had the ticket. I had not taken time to look for it, and in the track of garments from New York to Charlottetown, from Christiansted to Basse-Terre, I might have sloughed it off with a

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sweat-stained shirt. But the thought of the pendant weighed on me no more than the discarded books. My grasp on possessions had always been singularly light, and the money and the aliases the money supported were worth more to me than any conceivable property. For with the loss of my name, I had entered upon a life where nothing had any weight. Like a stringed balloon, I could drift from place to place, from name to name, no more involved with people than my inclination prompted.

There had been some bad days after I had first left New York. I had been shy of newspapers, terrified lest I should see my picture and be forced to read words that would superimpose me upon the neurotic boy who had run away from school. My old name was still a little tender, like an amputated limb, and I did not wish to be recalled to that unhappy identity. All the same, it had been nine weeks now since I had left New York, and I flattered myself that if there was still a face in newsprint it would not be mine. I was still small and young-looking and my face was unforgivably round, but I had cut my shock of hair and it was bleached out by the sun. My skin was leathered, I had a suggestion of sideburns, and I had pressed wrinkles about my eyes. In fact, I now looked like the impermeable Billy Axel who was living in Rosella Bowers's establishment in Pinta.

I felt a sudden elation, and spreading my arms wide, I stood in front of the window, opening my mouth against the tepid air just spiced with the coolness of the forecast evening, as the warm blue water I could see from my window was

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veiled with deeper blue currents. It was even possible, I thought, that I might work in this place. Perhaps I could fill that virgin notebook. The idea was vaguely stimulating. I had done nothing for so long — nothing in my classes, nothing in my room alone, nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing but stare out of the window at the grass — first at the sun, then at the night air moving on the grass. I wondered suddenly if George and Rit would be proud of me if I turned out to be a successful writer. Then I banished the thought as taboo — as were all thoughts of George and Rit, their anxieties, their simultaneous lives, as were all thoughts of my old life or of what was to become of me when the money disappeared.

On feet light with happiness, I walked from my room and out of Rosella Bowers's house and into the street. There were people moving about me with some presumable purpose. There was the augury of evening. There was the intoxicating cacophony of strings and babies and animals and soft feet, and I kept saying over and over to myself, "God, it's wonderful; God, it's wonderful" — words addressed not to a deity, not to a woman, not to myself, but words played by sound, unable to express the sudden fireworks in my mind.

Chapter Two

THE LIGHT kept striking my eyes and I kept rolling away from it, my thoughts still bogged in dreams, until at last a daytime image penetrated my night thoughts, an impression of the walls which cased me formed behind my lids, and I awoke to the reality of the room. I had been up very late indeed, wandering aimlessly, throwing myself on the mercy of the sounds and colors of the island night, and my first realization was that I was a little hung-over and very hungry. I slid out of bed and noticed that one arm was scabbed with purple paint. I sat and looked at it in a befuddled fashion, trying to remember how I could have picked that up. I flogged my

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thoughts into a kind of co-operation and managed to recall stopping at a native bar, and then another bar — was it the Trocadero? — and listening to a man playing the guitar. Had I talked to a wonderfully sympathetic man with a French accent and no face? And had he brought me home? I really couldn't remember. Abandoning the riddle, I took my toothbrush and made my way to the bathroom.

The bathroom had a strange impermanent air unlike the institutional solidity of American lavatories. It would not have surprised me if I had returned in the evening to find all the elderly enameled fixtures removed like so many caterer's chairs and the room reverted to a linen closet or sewing room. In any case, taking advantage of present circumstances, I stepped into the footed tub and pulled a copper chain attached to the faucet head on the pipe that hung over me. The water parted only vociferously and reluctantly from the faucet, stopping the minute I released my hold on the chain, but at length I managed to coax out a minuscule puddle in which I bathed, soaping away the perplexing purple. I dried myself in the air while brushing my teeth and then, pulling a towel rather inadequately about me and picking up my shorts, I started back again, only to freeze at the unexpected intrusion of a figure into the remembered landscape of my room. It was not an awe-inspiring figure, merely an inoffensive-looking middle-aged woman in black. She was standing a step beyond the doorway, a trespasser's step into my room, and seemed to be peering tentatively about. She heard my footsteps, gave a little jump, and turned. With her faded

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features and somber garb she might have been a ghost in this gaudy house. She was dressed all in black—a tight wintry-looking black suit of some shiny material which bunched in an unbecoming intricacy of ruffles at the hip, black stockings on her toothpick legs, black anklestrap shoes—a blackness alleviated only by the pair of white gloves she clutched in one hand and the mauve powder which seemed ordained to adhere to the shoulders of her suit.

"Oh," she cried. "You must be my new neighbor." Her smile did not succeed in its disarming intention. "You must be the American."

"Yes," I admitted, since falsehood was useless.

"Oh, I swear, I am delighted. I swear I am. We can always use a fine American boy here." Her smile, or rather her display of unappetizing teeth, remained static as she talked. I wished that she would stop guarding the threshold because, though no more than ordinarily bashful, I did not wish to join in a patriotic demonstration while almost naked. "You're not a Southern boy, are you?"

"No," I said. "I come from Pennsylvania." It was a small lie, but still a satisfaction.

"Well, that's almost Southern. The dear old Mason-Dixon Line runs right spang along the bottom of Pennsylvania."

"If you'll excuse me," I said, "I'd like to get into my room to dress."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I was just so glad to see a real American boy that I forgot my manners. What would anybody think if they came up those stairs? You just go right

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on in there and put on your shirt and trousers and I'll stand out here and talk to you through the door."

By this time I was in my room and half dressed.

"I'm Miss Ada Lee — I'm a Lee from Virginia, you know. In fact, if you'll forgive a little boasting, I have the honor to count the great Robert E. as one of my family." She paused. "I am afraid I don't have the pleasure of knowing to whom I am speaking."

"Billy Axel," I called out.

"Axel," she said, "Axel. Now is that a Scandinavian name?"

"No," I said, "Bulgarian."

"Bulgarian. Well, now, that's very unusual, isn't it?"

Conquering an impulse to say, "Not in Bulgaria," I replied that I supposed so.

"Well, Mr. A., I wonder if I could ask a little favor of you when you are all dressed. I want my bureau moved. I've asked Miss Bowers and Mary Lou a hundred times, but you know what these niggers" (this word in a conspiratorial whisper) "are. I know it just wouldn't be any trouble at all for a big strong man like you."

"All right," I said.

"Well, a thousand, thousand thanks. I'll be over here in my little room. When you get ready, you just come right on over."

After fooling with my sandals and prolonging my leisure as long as credulity permitted, I decided there was no point in delaying the inevitable. Still I could not help but be a little

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disgruntled at all the peremptory orders I had received in the last twenty-four hours. I remembered Alice in Wonderland's wistful complaint that all the strange beasts one met in Wonderland ordered one about so, and sympathizing heartily with her, I went in search of Miss Ada Lee.

She was impossible to escape.

"Right in here. Right in here, Mr. Axel," she called in that voice which was surely one of the least pleasing products of the Southland. "Here I am, big as life."

The room, contrary to my supposition that it would be antiseptically neat, was untidy in a wispy fashion, but the litter had the anonymity of wares in a wayside shop. Strewn about were hair nets, powder puffs, fan coral, china conch shells, net gloves, a sewing kit, a *Book of Common Prayer*, an elaborate candy box tied with a dirty string, and suspended everywhere, like inept mobiles, were little wire hangers over which dank wet kelps of stockings dried.

"What must you think of me?" she cried. "You just must be thinking I've gone native, like people say down here, and just let everything go to rack and ruin, but I'm doing a regular house-cleaning. You know, Mary Lou and these other girls never give my little room more than a lick and a promise. Indeed, I'm just so glad now that there's another American on the floor. You see, there are only these three bedrooms up here and for all I knew, that Miss Bowers might have put up a Jewish person or a French person and I declare I wouldn't put it past her to put a person of color up here and expect me to use the same bath, too. These people down here have no

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decent feelings. You know, I've warned Miss Bowers a thousand times that if she should do that I would be forced to vacate the premises. And I have the impression that if she had dared she would have put up an undesirable just to spite me. You know, if you are a person of refinement, and I can tell you are, I don't believe you will get on with Miss Bowers. She just cannot seem to agree with persons of refinement. I was staying with a family in South America before I came here — such lovely people, very wealthy and one of the finest families down there — and they told me, making no bones about it, that she was once no better than she should be; though I declare I probably shouldn't be telling tales out of school, though anyone listening to her for three minutes could tell as much. Still and all, that commercial hotel is no place for a lady to stay, so what is a lady to do?"

Suddenly, switching her style from querulous to wheedling, she said, "Now see here, if you could just help me with this wee bitty moving . . ."

"What would you like me to do?"

"Well, first off, I want that there bureau over on the far side of the room, and then I want my bed over there by the window so I can see the dawn's early light, as it says in the dear old 'Star Spangled Banner.' I'm a very early riser. No, no, no. Just a minute, Mr. Axel. We've got to move those things off the bureau first, haven't we, or they'll spill, and I'll lose all my little treasures."

And she took off the hair net, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the fan coral, two boxes of face powder, and the china

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conch shell. I pushed and shoved at the bureau, and finally lifted it. Though I was fairly strong for my size, I began to feel a little too conscious of my headache and my hunger.

"No, no, no. Not there, not there. Right here," she directed. "Oh, fine, Mr. Axel. That's just span dandy. And now let's us put all the things back on the bureau and then we can move the bed, once we get the armchair out of the way." I gave her a long look evaluating her physical structure. She had one of those games-mistress builds and I was willing to bet that she could still play a brilliant game of field hockey if she chose, and yet I concluded that the "we" in this case described a party of one.

"Look, Miss Lee," I said, "I'm terribly sorry. I really am. But I seem to be awfully hungry and I think I'd better postpone this moving job till I get something to eat. Do you know when they serve breakfast here?"

"Oh, my goodness gracious! Breakfast was over just hours ago. I was the last person they served and then I came up to wait for you. They never give you a thing after ten o'clock. Why, when those doors bang shut, that Mary Lou just wouldn't give you a bite to eat if you offered her the world on a string. Now, I'll tell you what you do. You just look in that box there and you'll find some real good pralines. Maybe not just like they make them in New Orleans, but they'll take the edge off your appetite. I know how you boys like sweets."

This idea was really nauseating and I turned to the door decisively.

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"Thanks anyway, Miss Lee, but I think I'll see if I can't get them to scrape up something for me downstairs."

She fluttered at me like a large black moth, her arms expressive.

"Oh, but Mr. Axel, we just haven't had time for any kind of a little chat yet. Why don't you let me brew you a cup of coffee right here. I have my own little heating ring — and —"

"Don't bother, really," I said, adding distance to my denial.

"Well, but look here, you just run right back up here after your brunch, Mr. Axel, 'cause we're going to be great friends, you know."

"Yes, yes, I'll try," I said dishonestly and ran downstairs. I did not envy the fat man his choice.

I tracked down Marie Louise in the maze of kitchens. After telling me that breakfast was officially over, she very kindly ordered a little colored girl to bring me some cocoa and a brioche on the veranda. She said the word "veranda" lovingly, and I saw that she was so proud of it that I would have no choice in the matter of where I was to sit. But it was not an unpleasant choice. I sat rocking in the shade of the porch, sipping my cocoa and watching the leathery leaves of the shrubbery moving back and forth, happily inverting my mind toward the point of nothingness advocated in yoga. I was very good at this and had often exercised it in my classes at college.

It was deeply pleasing to me that the stage set was almost identical with that of the previous afternoon, down to the little

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boy sitting at the top of the steps playing with his bottles. I wished to feel that, apart from the sole motion created by my journey through them, places were static. I wanted to contribute the only action in a world of still life, and I liked to feel that if I ever wished to return to a place (though return was a word which was taboo in my new vocabulary), I would not come back like a Rip van Winkle sleeper — that I would find the town, the people, the emotional aura the same.

Therefore, I looked with something close to affection at the little boy. I was particularly fond of children at that age when nothing is unintentionally incongruous. However, I could think of nothing appropriate to say to him. There was a large yellow dog who seemed overly endowed with tongue and teeth ranging back and forth inside the fence. I thought of asking him if this was his dog, but the question withered before it reached my lips and I lapsed into lethargy.

Towards noon an ancient black touring car rattled up to the double stairs and with seeming finality banged to a halt. It stood for several minutes before the door swung open and an enormously fat man in a rumpled linen suit and a Panama hat rolled out, puffing and panting as though exhausted from extreme exertion.

"Jee-rusalem the golden!" he bellowed. "This is a scandal, a downright scandal! Well, ye gods and little fishes! The governor shall hear about this. He'll hear all about this. No, no, no, Mrs. Kungle. No, I really . . . I insist . . . well, perhaps . . . Maybe it was your party, but after this outrage,

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you must let me . . . Well, very well, but we shall have another outing and next time it will be my treat."

The fat man stood silent for a moment or two, and at length helped, or at least handled, a middle-aged lady, who was apparently responsible for the inaudible portion of the conversation, as she descended from the car. It was not until they reached the veranda that I could hear her slow, agitated murmur.

"Please, please, Mr. Stanza. You mustn't upset yourself so. There really wasn't much money in it and I am sure that Dominique didn't steal it. I imagine I dropped it somewhere. Really the only reason I care at all is that my older daughter crocheted it."

"Well, I call it a crime, Mrs. Kungle. I tell you, you can't trust a man jack of these natives — steal their grandmother's gold teeth."

"I know you mean it to be kind, Mr. Stanza, but please don't worry on my account. And Dominique has been very faithful; I'm sure he wouldn't steal a thing."

"Anything you say, Mrs. Kungle. Your wish is my command. Well, perhaps I should be running along now. You'll be having lunch soon, so I'll just fold my tent and steal away."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Stanza. You're a wonderful guide. It was a most interesting morning."

As they shook hands, the fat man made a sort of curtsy, to which Mrs. Kungle replied with a little embarrassed duck of the head before disappearing through the screen door.

Left alone, the fat man turned toward the water, and with

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an unexpectedly executive air, checked the contents of seemingly endless pockets. Eventually he produced a pair of thick dark glasses, which he assumed, and a half-smoked cigar butt, which he stuck in his mouth. Since he seemed unconscious of my vantage point in the blue shade, I had a good opportunity to observe him with attention. He was really a colossus of a creature, not *a* fat man, but *the* fat man, and by definition, the fat paramour of whom Rosella had spoken with such relish. Bulk for bulk he would not have displaced a great deal more water than Rosella, but while she was a decaying peak of flesh, this man gave the impression of expanding before your very eyes. He had the beautiful fresh flushed skin of a child, but that the flush was all-pervasive and ran from his fingertips to his scalp, culminating in curls of damp pink hair. Inexplicably, there was an exuberance evoked by his obesity. He had the jollity of the stretched skin of a red balloon at a children's party. Like a balloon he was expanding beyond all points of pressure, his pudgy hands swelled beyond his cuffs, his neck bloated over his collar. I had the feeling that he might even give the expiring "Whee" of a balloon and deflate if he dared to undo his studs. Unexpectedly, he wheeled on feet that were so small they looked purely decorative, and glancing at me over his glasses with opaque little currants of eyes, favored me with a broad smile, and with an outstretched palm, ambled over to me.

"Well, well, well," he beamed. "As I live and breathe, it's my old friend Billy from last night! Recuperating with no ill effects, I trust!"

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I was completely nonplused. I could not believe that this creature would have failed to penetrate my haze of daiquiris, if only as a figure out of delirium tremens.

"I'm feeling pretty well, thanks. And you?" I hedged.

"Oh, coming along, coming along. Of course, these blinkers help a little."

"Perhaps I should get some."

"I think you said you were a writer picking up a little local color here and there."

"Yes, that's right. I am a writer."

"Well, if you put me in your book, you better leave out last night. Don't know what my old granny might say." He laughed jovially at this notion.

"Of course," he continued, "as long as you are part of our happy throng, old Catbird Stanza is at your service. Unsurpassable as comrade, guide, and tippler par excellence. Guess I could show you some local color. Not the kind I show Mrs. Kungle, either." He laughed again. "How long do you expect to be in our midst?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Well, at least you're not in a hurry. Great to get away from the everyday stresses of city life. You said you came from New York, didn't you?"

"In a way."

"Great little old city, New York, but of course Miami's my real stamping ground. Silver towers over the surf; lots of action, if you like that sort of thing. Do you know Miami, by any chance?"

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"No, I don't," I said, hoping desperately that I was not contradicting anything I might have said the night before.

"Well, after we've painted old Pinta red, maybe I'll get a chance to show you that good old 'moon over Miami.'" He chanted the last phrase and then chuckled. "I tell you what you and I need, Billy, old boy, a little hair of the dog. Why don't we step down to the Troc, and your Uncle Catbird will buy you some firewater and fix you up just as good as new."

I felt myself drawn almost gravitationally into his orbit. He leaned on me as we descended from the porch, only pausing to call to the little boy, who had retreated judiciously before his avalanche steps.

"Ahoy there, Tiger! How do the Pirates stand in the pennant race? My home team, you know," he added to me.

The little boy stared firmly at the ground, deprecating the enigmatic coexistence of adults in his world. As we reached the gate, the yellow dog lolloped up and, at a distance of perhaps three paces from us, crouched and began to bay dismally.

"Brrrr," said the fat man, hopping nimbly behind the gate. "That beast really has it in for me. Every time I go by, he eyes me like I was a couple of cans of Gro-pup."

I joined him on the other side of the fence, and after casting an apprehensive glance over his shoulder to make certain that we were not pursued, he gave a large puff of relief and favored me with a smile.

"Whew! That was a narrow escape," he said, and as we

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started down the road, he asked, "By the way, did you ever hear the story of the two bulls who got lost and ended up in Mrs. McCarthy's rose garden?"

I hadn't and he told me. As we walked toward the town, it developed that he knew many stories with which I was unfamiliar. He was so bent on pleasing me that quite in spite of myself I was pleased, and by the time we reached the Trocadero, I found that when he laughed, I laughed with him.

Although, in Catbird's words, the sun had "just crossed the yardarm," the Trocadero was doing a moderate business. There were half a dozen drinkers at the bar and a slightly larger number scattered at various tables. At one table an elegant silver-haired gentleman was sitting alone, sipping a milky glass of Pernod with a mildly abstracted air.

Catbird ambled straight to his table and heaved himself into the unoccupied chair.

"Good morning, Baron. I've brought an old friend to call on you."

The gentleman glanced up politely, his green eyes grave. "Why good morning, Billy," he said. "Perhaps you can find yourself a chair." He had one of the few truly beautiful speaking voices I can remember. It existed almost independent of personality, even of the phrases it uttered — a thrilling voice, deep, cool, dusted slightly with an accent. I remembered it from my troubled night — an oasis in a desert of jargon.

"Thank you, Baron," I said, and pulling up a chair, I sat down.

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"Alas, not 'Baron.' You must call me Christian. Our friend Catbird has bestowed on me an honor which the kings of France withheld. Have you been working on your novel this morning?"

"He has not. When I found him up at Rosella's, he was holding his head and moaning. So old Dr. Stanza brought him down here for a little eye opener."

"Ah, yes, of course," said Christian. "And what is your pleasure, gentlemen?"

Catbird asked for a rum on the rocks, and after some indecision I joined him.

"Murray," called Christian, "a rum on the rocks for each of my friends, if you please."

The bartender was making a pretense of polishing glasses, but he stopped with the manner of one used to poor treatment. He poured the drinks and brought them over to our table with a hollow show of courtliness.

"Yes sir, Baron. Can I sweeten your Pernod?"

"Not yet, thank you, Murray," said Christian, dismissing him. "I hope your headache did not prevent you from doing satisfactory work. You see how solicitous I am. It is that I am a great admirer of the arts and I am astounded that one so young as yourself should be so diligent. And, of course, that both Catbird and I hope to figure favorably in your novel."

I was not quite sure that he was not making fun of me, so I replied a little uncertainly.

"Well, I don't really have a headache. Actually I spent most of the morning moving some furniture for an old lady."

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"Madame Bowers?" Christian inquired with elevated eyebrows.

"Oh, no," I said. "A terrible old Southern lady."

Catbird began to guffaw. "And who could that be," he rolled out, "but the belle of the Caribbean, Miss Ada Lee! Stay out of her clutches, my boy. She'd think nothing of asking you to move the Empire State Building to Topeka, Kansas, stone by stone. So you don't care for our Miss Ada?"

I realized almost the minute that I had applied my adjective that I had made a frightful *gaffe* and nothing within my power could absorb the childish blush on my face.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Catbird," I stammered. "I forgot she was such a great friend of yours."

The fat man let out a great carnivorous roar of laughter. "You certainly are a sly one, Billy, my boy. I'll give my eyeteeth for a crooked penny if you haven't been talking to that old sink, Rosella Bowers. Why, if she didn't outweigh me, I'd give her a good drubbing for spreading scandal like that about me and the Ada. Do you know what she said to Miss Ada one day after I left the boarding house? She said, 'Miss Lee, your paramour looks more to me like a parasite.' Poor old Ada. I'd have given everything in my pockets to see her face." And he stopped to wipe a few tears off his own. "To hear her talk, she'd still be a virgin, even if she'd been born pretty. Why I'm surprised she didn't strangle the old girl with her own pearls."

"Ah," said Christian, "the famous pearls. They are the only thing left to poor Madame Bowers of her fantastic life. You

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know, she was in certitude the last of the *grandes cocottes*. General Cramm once told my father the story of how she got them. I was just a boy then and my eyes grew as big as dishes. It seems she was up the Nile on a houseboat with old Alexis Steinhaus and the Sheik Abu Ben Shofar came to hear of her sojourn. He must have seen her photograph in some ancient *Paris-Match*, for he sent his Riffs to abduct her while she and Steinhaus were viewing some pyramids by moonlight. Perhaps she had heard of the sheik's great wealth, because the story goes that she went off quite docilely, if not friskily. Or perhaps she was tired of old Steinhaus. At any rate, she stayed with the sheik a month or two while Steinhaus tried vainly to raise an avenging army, and just as the ambassadors were on the point of exchanging notes, she returned, sailing down the Nile on a barge that Cleopatra would not have scorned, looking — oh, very enigmatic — and, of course, around her throat were those extraordinary pearls."

"Is that so?" said Catbird. "I thought she got them from some old king."

"Well," said Christian, "Abu Ben Shofar was certainly a king. He was veritably an absolute monarch, at a time when all the European royalties were quaking on their thrones."

"How much do you suppose they are worth?"

"How much is the Taj Mahal worth, my friend?" said Christian with a shrug.

"Well, how much would it cost to buy them again, say? I hear that one string of real good pearls is worth about a hundred grand."

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"How can one say? I am sure they are fabulous."

"Well, then, why doesn't she sell them and set herself up with a nice fat annuity and a couple of Dago bed warmers?"

"You will have to ask her. Perhaps they are more important to her than an annuity. Perhaps they recall her youth or perhaps she retains a *tendresse* for the sheik."

"Anyway," I broke in knowledgeably, "when you sell jewelry you don't get much for it. I sold some diamonds once and I only got about twenty per cent of what they were supposed to be worth."

"Oh yeah?" said Catbird, his eyes shining brightly at me. "Was that the best you could do? Who did you sell them to?"

I felt myself go very hot again as I sensed my indiscretion.

"Oh, I tried a couple of people," I managed carelessly, "but that was all I could get."

I was grateful when Christian drew the fat man's attention by ordering another round of drinks. Over our glasses we chatted on. Christian told us of Antoinette Labat's jewel case, on one shelf of which her diamond rings were arranged by color, from canary yellow in the upper left hand corner to blue at the lower right. Suddenly Catbird glanced at his watch, gulped down his drink and cried, "Suffering Sam! Do you know how late it is? I've got to get down to the dock three minutes ago. So long, fellas," and he lumbered from the bar into the blaze of the street and jostled his way, a great undulating figure in white, out of sight.

I was rather taken aback, since I had no idea of the con-

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ventional arrangement about paying and up until then I had assumed I was Catbird's guest.

"Will he be back?" I asked with some trepidation.

"Oh, yes, he usually returns about three-thirty, I believe."

"I don't think I can wait that long. I have to get back to the Crooked Mile for lunch."

"Well, perhaps I shall see you here later, in that case."

"I'm afraid I didn't bring any money. Do you think I can sign the check?"

"You must not consider it. It has been my privilege."

"But I thought it was Catbird's party."

"Ah, my friend, when you have been on this island a little longer, you will discover that Catbird's party is celebrated only on the twenty-ninth of February — and we must wait two years for that."

Feeling more than a little embarrassed, I thanked Christian and headed back to my lodgings.

Chapter Three

I SOON FOUND that the life on Pinta created Billy Axel rather than that Billy Axel created a life on Pinta. And though the life was far pleasanter than the somnambulistic existence of that vague forebear in Princeton, it shared a purposelessness and a pattern extraneously imposed. Each morning, though now decently clad, I fenced to escape a soul-baring chat with Miss Ada Lee. I exchanged civilities with Marie Louise; occasionally I discussed the weather and the color of the ocean with Mrs. Kungle and her acolyte, Miss Floss. I spent endless hours at the Trocadero, avoiding conversation with Murray, who was fond of discussing his sexual prow-

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ess; seeking it with Christian, who treated me, to my delight, as another man of the world; but usually bantering with the ebullient Catbird. However, as always, my real life began with the hour when all the world slept — when only the occasional unwilling window of the invalid or the insomniac was alight. Then I prowled the town. At first the two black constables were alarmed, but almost immediately they accepted this eccentricity as they did so many others of the pale birds of passage who lighted upon their island. Soon in the darkest night, I could find my way from the quai up the hill to the top of the town; from Rosella's on the east to the Maison le Grand, a shack of a native bar, the western terminal of the city. Finally as the sky would blanch, I would grow suddenly weary and I would return to my room and sleep dreamlessly. When I awoke I would take a shower and on my return dodge Miss Ada anew.

A string of days and nights must have passed between my morning drink at the Troc and my next definitive meeting with the fat man, but I find that in my memory, time telescopes, and the days appear like objects seen through ruffled water — indistinct, merging, deceptive. Days and nights must have passed, but they passed unnumbered and uncommemorated.

In any case, I do remember sitting at the bottom of a flight of white stucco steps at five o'clock one morning. Murray had finally ejected me from my perch in the Trocadero with a conspicuous lack of the deference he showed Christian de Monceau. I was hazily wondering whether or not to pursue

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my unappointed rounds. I had a prejudice against going home to bed, since Miss Ada had taken to leaving her door open a few inches and I had begun to have the uncomfortable feeling that she was waiting up for me. At this low ebb in the day and my thoughts, one of those series of mysterious bangings and shoutings which punctuated the night in Pinta emanated from above me. I looked up, as what had been a corner became rounded with the slow bulk of the fat man. We stared at each other a moment, like strangers in a fog, the youth of the morning palpable between us. Then he burst into a great gust of laughter and cried, "Oh, I say, Billy, me lad, you are laying it on a bit thick. What would the Ada say if she saw you lounging outside Madame La Farge's finishing school in this disgraceful fashion?"

"What?" I said blankly.

"Oh, you can tell your Uncle Catbird all about it. I won't tell Miss Ada. You know why they call me Catbird, don't you? Always flying in and out of the cat house," and he roared with laughter. "Why, that sly old lady! She didn't even say she knew you."

"You mean this is the local brothel?" I said.

"Brothel? You and your college education. Oh, well, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

He sat down next to me and fanned himself with his hat. "Well, I don't mind telling you that I'm not as young as I once was. I'm pretty pooped. As a matter of fact," he reflected, "I don't see much of you except at the Troc. Do you spend all your time up here?"

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"No," I said. "I didn't even know this place existed until just now. What I have really been doing is looking for some quiet place where I can sit and think."

Catbird gave me a long look. For the first time in our acquaintance he lapsed into earnestness.

"Really?" he said. "You know you're just like me. I always have to have some little place of my own. You know, some little nook where you can just be yourself and let the rest of the world go by."

"Yes," I said. "That's what I hoped to find here."

He paused a long minute, then he said, "Well, Billy, I think we're pretty good friends and we understand each other. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes," I said, "I think so."

"O.K., then. Follow me."

I tagged along behind Catbird, who had accelerated to a surprisingly brisk pace. Past Rosella's we went, past a scattering of native shacks and off onto a narrower road. Every now and then, through the trees, I could see one of the planter's homes. Although there was no suggestion that we were not isolated in our hour, the fat man occasionally glanced over his shoulder with the air of one fearing pursuit, and this endowed our journey to nowhere with the portentous intensity of a child's game. Just before a narrow drive marked *Beau Séjour*, A. St. Denis, Catbird paused, and with a heavily gallant manner, ushered me before him, not down the drive, but onto a suggestion of a foot path that went off at a right angle from it. We moved along this for perhaps ten minutes,

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whispering among live oak, banyan, and palmetto, instinctively lowering our voices, perhaps out of deference to the reign of silence in unfrequented ways. I had heard behind the fat man's shrill whisper the undertone of water and quite suddenly our path merged with the stream to whose tempo I had attended. It was a clear, cool-looking strand of water and I was not loath to accompany it on its way.

Suddenly, Catbird turned and, giving me a great conspiratorial smile, said in huge high spirits, "Well, we've just about made it, Billy boy. Now, off with your sneakers for the last leg." With a sigh he sat himself down, removed his shoes and stockings, and rolled up his trouser legs. His feet and ankles were white and hairless and gave the curious impression of being rudimentary. After I had followed his example, he cried, "Man the torpedoes, and straight ahead!" and plunged into the stream. I wondered for a moment if he had brought me all this way to frolic in the water, but he had already moved off purposefully down the stream itself. We tracked the water down a groove it had eaten into the rocks, brushing our way through groinings of branches partitioned below by water and on four sides by the greenery that grew ahead of and closed behind our hands. Suddenly our waterway began to descend rapidly and we followed it as best we could between mossy rock walls, sliding here and there on a slippery rock, sitting and edging along when we came to minor water falls, till suddenly turning a sharply cragged corner, we were emptied out of the shadow of the rocks into a great translucent green sea-water pool which fell away in a cascade

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of stones to the travertine sea. On my right, as exciting as the artichoke's heart, was the long semicircular stretch of silver beach which the cliffs and foliage had concealed.

The fat man assumed the air of an impresario presenting a new extravaganza. "Presto change-o," he cried, with an exuberant bellow.

It was indeed the most exquisite perimeter imaginable, and Catbird took transparent pleasure in my wonder and delight.

"Pretty sweet, isn't she?" he asked. "Let those rich millionaires keep their Palm Beach and their Malibu, I say, Billy boy, it's you and me for the Villa Stanza. Now come along, come along. I've got another surprise for you."

He trotted up the beach and disappeared into a clump of shade trees. I ran off after him and just as I reached his last visible footprint, he popped out at me, his lower lip drawn in, and said solemnly, "Mr. Stanza's residence. And who shall I say is calling?"

"Billy Axel."

"Mr. Stanza is always home to Mr. Axel. This way, sir." And he moved aside. I was astonished to see the cool room of leaves which his bulk unblocked. Between two trunks was strung an elaborate fringed hammock, on which rested an enormous palm leaf fan. A parasol nailed at the head must have been for aesthetic rather than functional reasons since the shade it cast was redundant. There was a campstool, a large Thermos, and a rustic table on which were bottles of sun oil, boxes of cigars, and a pack of cards. A trash can nearby was stacked high with empty beer bottles.

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"Oh, Catbird," I cried, bereft of all speech, feeling myself Robinson Crusoe and proud Balboa in one happy entity. Catbird, exultant at my admiration, broke into a funny little excited jig.

"Have a beer, old boy. No, sit down. No, why don't we go swimming!" he cried all in one breath.

We ended by sitting and having some beer which he drew out from under a tarpaulin.

"Christ," I said, "this is terrific! Just terrific. Who told you about it?"

"Told me about it? Told me about it? Now which of these unimaginative old stick-in-the-muds out here would have had the wit to stumble on your Uncle Catbird's tropical paradise? Why, Billy boy, you are looking upon Carleton B. Stanza, pioneer. I hewed this place from the wilderness with these two hands," and he extended two well-manicured paws. "Nobody else in the whole world knows about it except you, and you've gone scout's honor not to split. I certainly don't want a lot of tourists down here with their Coca-Cola bottles and their orange peels interrupting my repose. No, this is your Uncle Catbird's own little hideaway. Absolute privacy. Monarch of all I survey. How about that?"

I wondered about the family St. Denis but said nothing. His air of cozy excitement was too seductive.

"And you brought all this down yourself?"

"Why sure. I'm all seven Santini brothers rolled into one. And I guess I look it," and he guffawed. "Got to have the comforts of home, you know. Though I can't say my old home

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was any too comfortable. This makes a monkey out of it in a walk-away. Seriously, though," he said anxiously, "it's quite a surprise, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Well, now, what would you say to a little swim?"

"Great idea. I guess it's all right if I don't have a bathing suit . . . ?"

"Bathing suit? Why, my boy, the whole Caribbean is your private swimming pool. Birthday suit is the order of the day."

While I flung my clothes on the sand, the fat man took off his numerous garments with great care and folded them seam by seam over various wooden hangers suspended from nails in the tree trunks. When he had divested himself of everything but his Panama hat and his cigar, he reached into his coat pocket and produced his dark glasses. In the nude, he was an extraordinary and impressive figure, resembling nothing so much as a huge homemade puppet with a lumpy white muslin body and clay hands and face clumsily stained to simulate flesh tones.

"Well, down to the sea in ships," he said and puffed off down the beach. I followed him. His pace slowed as we reached the water's edge until finally he chugged in one place, sputtering and wheezing and breast-stroking dry air. Then like a dog who has barked imprudently at a wave, he slunk away from the water, and scrambled into the rock pool where he sat submerged to the waist, his hat shading his face, puffing on his cigar.

"Aren't you coming in?" I called.

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"No, no. Not just now. There's a better view from up here."

I plunged into the water and swam out perhaps an eighth of a mile. The water was so clear that it was like swimming in ozone. I could see the sand shining beneath me, but when I dove down it was, like the mirage of mountains, far more distant than it appeared. When I floated on my back, I could see flurries of birds wheeling in the air and when I rolled to my stomach I could see clans of fish wheeling in the sea, and the demarcation line seemed to diminish in my mind until I felt myself elongated upon the slenderest possible horizon, and I began to understand that but for the ceiling of sand it would be possible to drown in the green water, feeling you were swimming ever upward.

Catbird had vanished by the time I came back. I found him swinging gently in his hammock, enveloped in a florid penang, his hands folded over the imposing arc of his stomach, his tiny fat feet pointed out.

"The wages of sin are catching up with me, my boy," he told me. "Unless I get a little shut-eye, I won't have enough strength to swat a fly."

I stretched out in the sun outside his pavilion, giving myself over to the warmth, and the soporific rustling of leaves and lapping of waves, as close to contentment, perhaps, as I had ever been.

My trance passed indistinguishably into slumber, and it was quite a few hours later that I awoke to find Catbird dressed and busy putting his little domain in order.

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"About time you woke up," he told me. "You'll never make your mark this way. You don't want to end up an old beach-comber, you know."

"What time is it?"

"Past twelve o'clock. I've worked up quite an appetite, too. I could polish off that old yellow grizzly bear up at Rosella's just like he was an hors d'oeuvre."

"Why don't you come up and have lunch with me at the Crooked Mile," I said.

Catbird treated this as though it were a suggestion rather than an invitation, and replied that, in that case, we had better mosey along.

We made our way back to the Crooked Mile with none of the elaborate precautions we had taken on the way down, the fat man pausing only to whittle off a stout stick with a silver penknife he carried. "In case that hound of the Baskervilles gets fresh with me," he explained.

Marie Louise greeted me in the hall. Always before, she had maintained an air of frosted and imperturbable calm, but today she was in a state approaching excitement.

"Oh, Mr. Axel, I am happy you return. I went to knock at your door. Lunch today is at one-fifteen and Madame Bowers will attend."

"I didn't know Madame Bowers ever came to meals."

"Oh, she hasn't been in for maybe a year now, but she says now that the countess is coming, she will have to come, too."

"I hope this won't inconvenience you too much, but I have a guest," I said.

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"Oh, no trouble, sir," she said, and retired through the dining room.

"Well," said Catbird, "I certainly am glad to be here. I sure as spitfire wouldn't want to miss seeing the old girl practice her society manners on the common folks. I bet she's just about forgotten how to eat with a knife and fork."

"We'd better go out on the veranda and wait," I said, fearing that Catbird's impieties might be overheard. "I wish we had known lunch would be late. I could have gotten another swim."

"And we wouldn't have had to dash up the hill like a couple of mountain goats."

We had been seated on the veranda for only a minute or two when Miss Ada Lee burst out of the house and hurried up to my chair. "Why, Mr. Axel, have you heard the news — ?" She stopped short then, as though she had just noticed the more than ample presence of my friend. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. I didn't notice that you had a companion. I do hope I'm not interrupting something."

"Oh, no," I said. "You know Catbird Stanza, don't you?"

It was unclear from Miss Ada's demeanor whether she did or not, but Catbird got up and pulled up a chair for her. "Sit down, Ada, sit down. Billy and I are just discussing our mis-spent youths. Maybe you'd like to contribute a little story along those lines."

"Oh, Mr. Stanza, how you do go on," she said sourly, in a flatted rendition of the Southern belle's trill. "And to what may I ask do we owe the unexpected honor of this visit?"

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"Don't get in a twitchet, Ada. Billy here has invited me to lunch."

"Invited you to lunch? Do you know what's happening in there? Miss Rosella Bowers is coming to the table. She is breaking bread with her guests for the first time in five years!"

"Well, what's the matter? Do you think she's worked up such an appetite that there won't be anything left for me?"

"You don't seem to understand that this is a real occasion, Mr. Stanza. I must say that I have been totally unable to discover any cause for it. I asked Mary Lou, but she just gave me that big blank stare of hers. I swear sometimes I don't think she takes in half of what's going on."

We had been joined by this time by Mrs. Kungle and her friend Miss Floss. Mrs. Kungle belonged to that familiar nomad tribe which can be identified with little difficulty as the traveling American widow. Miss Floss, though hardly what could be called noteworthy, was slightly more unusual. Her gray hair, plaited with strands of fuchsia and chartreuse yarn, was attached in two small mats, like hooked rugs, to the back of her long head. She wore dirndls and peasant blouses and she had a crush on the arts. Indeed, she had once taught painting and handicrafts at a progressive school in Toledo, Ohio.

These ladies were, if anything, more titillated than Miss Ada at Mrs. Bowers's unexpected emergence. They had had tea with her one day and were not a little overwhelmed by her first-name familiarity with European high life.

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"You know," said Miss Floss, "she was once a famous singer, and she was such a great artist that she sang before all the crowned heads."

Marie Louise came out to announce dinner and we all trooped in. Colonel and Mrs. Bagby were already in the dining room. The colonel was standing by his place, his inevitable book beneath his arm, and Mrs. Bagby was seated and smiling. The ladies took their places after a little jousting, since both Miss Floss and Miss Ada Lee seemed determined to occupy the seat of honor next to Mrs. Bowers's chair. After a slight skirmish, Miss Ada triumphed and Miss Floss sulked. Catbird and I, reminded of our manners by the colonel, continued to stand behind our chairs, but he whispered loudly to me, "A T.K.O. for the Ada."

At last Mrs. Bowers made her entrance. I had never seen her standing before. She did not, as I had expected, walk with a cane, but entered with a queenly stride, and despite her shapeless garment, displayed a certain stateliness.

"Good morning, all," she said. "What a pleasant party. I am delighted you could join us, Mr. Stanhope," and with a reflective glance at the fat man's paunch, she murmured, "I trust there will be enough for *all*. Well, unfortunately, we have no man of the cloth with us, so I shall presume to say the grace." She bowed her head and mumbled inaudibly. Suddenly she thundered, "Amen," and sat down. She picked a bell off the table and rang it loudly, calling at the same time, "Marie Louise, the soup."

"Oh, my Lord," she continued, "how dreadfully this table

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is seated. Now, Billy, will you please sit at the foot where Mr. Stanhope is. That's right. Colonel Bagby on my right, please, and I know you like to sit next to your wife. Now, Mrs. Kungle on my left and then Miss Floss, and you, down there. Now, I think that is much better." At the end of this edict, she lapsed into silence, leaving a trail of consternation in her wake.

Mrs. Kungle was so intimidated by her proximity to Mrs. Bowers that she immediately overturned her water glass. Miss Floss gave Miss Ada, who constituted the discomfited "you-down-there," a pitying glance in her new position below the salt. The colonel looked as if he had accepted his newly assigned post with mixed feelings, which were perhaps partly attributable to the fact that Mrs. Kungle's water had by now inundated his plate. Only Catbird continued to beam expansively on the company.

A constraint seemed to have fallen upon the crowd with Rosella Bowers's presence, and as a result there were only the most perfunctory attempts at conversation. Miss Floss asked Mrs. Kungle what her plans were for the afternoon, but rather than lecture the assembly at large on her projected activities, she made an equivocal answer. It was not until the chicken appeared that Rosella, who was certainly the muse of conversation at this table, stirred.

"You know, I read the other night a most interesting article. It said that by 1977 the yellow races would be in complete ascendancy. You know, Nostradamus predicted it back in Catherine de Medici's day, long before any of us were thought

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of." ("Most of us, anyway," the fat man whispered to me.)
"And now it's all coming true."

"Why what a downright horrid idea," gasped Miss Ada, shocked out of her pout. "You don't really believe they will, do you?"

"Of course they will. Take over everything, and a good thing, too. After all the Chinese are the only truly civilized race in the world. I remember years ago I went to dine with Muriel Blessington just after she got back from Peking. She had stayed for a while with the old Princess Hui-San — the most exquisite creature that ever drew breath — as tiny as a doll. When I knew her she was well over eighty, but her skin was just as smooth and white as a gardenia petal. Well, Muriel asked her in her vulgar fashion how she did it. I suppose Princess Hui-San must have taken pity on her (poor Muriel was always so dreadfully spotty), for before she left she made her a present of the most beautiful porcelain jar filled with cream — Mr. Stanhope, aren't you afraid that you will pull a ligament? This may not be Windsor Castle, but let us observe some of the niceties. I am sure that Mrs. Bagby will pass you the rolls if you ask her pleasantly — In any case, when I arrived for dinner, poor Muriel was in a state. It seems that her maid had dropped the jar and with it the cream which poor Muriel had thought would preserve her like a fly in amber through all eternity. I laughed when I heard about it, for it just so happened that I knew the princess's *real* secret, so I told her, 'Don't worry about the cream. If you want to have skin like the princess Hui-San, just take a pipe of opium at

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nightfall, just one — no more, no less.' If you could have *seen* poor Muriel. You might have thought I had told her to eat arsenic, but that's how the old lady did it all the same. Any more and you turn yellow, of course."

Mrs. Blessington could certainly have been no more shocked than Mrs. Kungle was now. When Mrs. Bowers turned to address her next remark to her, she started, as if she expected to be offered a pipe and a pill. But Mrs. Bowers only inquired after her missing pocketbook.

"No. I'm afraid it hasn't turned up. The only reason I care is my oldest daughter made it for me."

"It was *petit point*?"

"No, she crocheted it. You see, I am Leo, the sign of the Lion, so it was half red for the ruby and half larkspur blue for the larkspur. They are my gem and my flower."

"Ah, well, at any rate, I suppose it had sentimental value. I know what those things are. Of course, I don't know what I should do if I ever lost my pearls. They are the only thing of value that I ever inherited. Of course, when the countess arrives, you'll meet someone who puts a phenomenal value on sentimental objects. She had a little dog called Robespierre. And you know she and her husband always used to spend their summers in their *château* in Normandy, and, of course, little Robespierre always had to go everywhere with her. Well, one fall they were all packed to go back to Paris when Robespierre disappeared. Oh, she was *distract*. She looked everywhere. Finally, the count had to go on to Paris alone, while she stayed behind hoping the poor little thing would turn up.

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Just when she had given up all hope, the village cobbler's wife arrived with a wicker basket which she gave the butler, and what should be inside but little Robespierre, safe and sound. It seems that she had found the little animal a day or two before, but that morning, when she heard that Madame in the great house had lost her dog, she walked seven miles to give him back.

Well, when Eliane heard the good news, she ran right down the road after the woman to thank her. Then she took off the beautiful sable coat she was wearing and wrapped it around the poor creature's shoulders. I don't suppose she had ever had more than a homespun shawl to her name before. And then, when Eliane returned to town, she arranged it with her attorney to buy a little farm for the woman and to give her an annuity for the rest of her days. I think that is the *niciest* story I know. I often think of how happy that poor woman must be and all for a little dog, mind you . . . Well, is everybody finished?"

Marie Louise murmured that she had not yet served dessert. "Oh, dear me. I'm not used to all this activity. If you will excuse me, I believe I will retire to my room instead of taking dessert with you." She yawned mightily and rose. Just before she left, she turned to Marie Louise and said, "If Mr. Stanhope is still hungry, perhaps you could kill another chicken. With this she departed.

We were all somewhat subdued. In comparative silence we finished our lunch and dispersed to spend our diverse afternoons.

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I felt it was a little too early to accompany Catbird to the Trocadero, so I found instead my habitual seat on the veranda and, stretching myself generously over it, prepared to devote myself to my unprofitable reveries. I noticed that the little boy who ordinarily haunted the gate had crept up nearer the house and was sitting near the steps of the porch playing with his six bottles. I felt his eyes upon me, but I was not prepared for him to speak.

"Where do you live in Miami?" he said in the funny sing-song voice of island children, as unlike the voices of American children as are the voices of the deaf. I was surprised to hear him address me. I had almost assumed by now that he was as speechless as his friend, the yellow dog.

"I don't come from Miami," I told him.

"Yes," he insisted, as if he hadn't heard me, "but where do you live when you're in Miami?"

"I'm afraid I've never been in Miami," I answered, a little regretfully.

"Oh," he said, with what I assumed was finality, and went back to his bottles. But a moment later he looked up at me again. "Do you know where we live in Miami? We live on Sunset Island."

I had never heard of Sunset Island, so I said merely, "Well, that sounds great."

"When we go back to Sunset Island, I'm going to have a dog."

"I thought that yellow dog belonged to you."

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"Oh, no. He's just an island dog. My daddy doesn't want me to have an island dog."

"Do you like Sunset Island better than Pinta?"

"Well, my daddy says I was too young to remember when we lived on Sunset Island. But I do remember. Everyone on Sunset Island wore white. We lived with Mr. Dennis Guinan, the oil duke. You know what Mr. Dennis Guinan used to do? He used to eat two lamb chops and some French fried potatoes for breakfast every morning. My daddy saw him. My name is Dennis, too. I was named after Mr. Dennis Guinan on Sunset Island."

"Why do they call you Tiger?"

"When I was a little boy, I used to hang around this fellow on the island who played the big drums. His name was Tiger and so they used to call me Tiger, too. He isn't here any more. He went up to Antigua and my daddy says now that I'm so big I shouldn't play with the island folks any more."

He was perhaps eight. I wondered who daddy was.

"Someday," he said, "Mr. Dennis Guinan will sail up to Pinta on his yacht and take us all home to Sunset Island. Have you ever seen a swimming pool?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well, it's a little bit of water in the middle of a big green lawn, and all the people sit around it and sing and drink cold drinks and have a jolly time. Mr. Dennis Guinan has a swimming pool."

"That ought to be fun."

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"Fun. Oh, yes. I have a picture of a swimming pool that I had from a magazine and I knew it must be Mr. Dennis Guinan's. My daddy said it was very like. I knew because I knew just how it would be."

"Pinta must be an interesting place to live, though," I said. "And when you go back to the States, you'll be speaking perfect French, too, and then you'll have such an easy time in school."

"Yes, I understand French, but I don't speak it any more. My daddy says I am getting too big. Yes, I like Pinta. There is a good high place on the hill where I can watch the boats come in."

Then he took three bottles under one arm and picked the other three up by the necks and moved back to his original station by the gate.

"This is where I am supposed to play," he called to me, "so I can meet the nicest people."

And so we both sat and waited — Tiger for the millennium and I for sleep to come.

Since it is almost impossible to catalogue happiness, I can give no reason why I should look back on the ten days that followed as the happiest in my memory. I know only that they gave me the relief of a warm bath when one is tired. I slid into them and was thankful. I spent almost all my time on Catbird's beach. I ate there, drank there, and often slept there at

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night. Soon I was much more in residence than the fat man, who was deeply gregarious. But the time we spent there together was a very happy time. It was as if our minds had been shipwrecked from Pinta then, for we never spoke of the present. We spent our days always in the same composition. I would become groggy from the sea and sun, the fat man would move neatly from his rock pool to his fringed hammock. We would play endless games of gin rummy for mythical stakes. I almost invariably lost. In fact, at the end of a week, I owed Catbird a sum that would have shocked the wealthy. We drank beer as we played and we talked sporadically. The fat man was much quieter on his beach, but gradually I learned something of his life. He had been born in a little town near Pittsburgh and his grandparents had brought him up by the book. When he was fourteen, he had stolen a hundred and twenty-five dollars from his grandfather, whom he called "the meanest white man in Frazerville, Pennsylvania," and hitchhiked out to Las Vegas with a system. The system ate up all of the hundred and twenty-five dollars, but he never went home. Instead, he worked his way out to Los Angeles. He never told me his stories consecutively, but by bits and pieces and implications, so that I was unable to visualize his life chronologically. But the gaudy fabric of his days did begin to cohere in my mind in a kind of dream weave. Often he would start a story and then stop abruptly, and despite my careful questions, he never filled in these parentheses in his life.

One time he told me, "I know you're not too sweet on the Ada, kid. But I could tell you some things about her that

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would really surprise you. Someday, maybe I'll tell you about how I met the old duck. It's quite a tale."

I was fascinated to know what strange juxtaposition of the stars had resulted in Miss Ada's and Catbird's cohesion, but he would tell me no more. Sometimes I wondered why, in return for his semi-confidences, I did not tell him my story. But there was no compulsion. We put down our conversation as casually as we played our cards, and our intimacy became like the intimacy of brotherhood — one built not on the intensity of confidences but on the lack of any need for them. When I woke in the morning now, I would feel subtly bolstered by the idea of my fat friend and our time together. The days were so familiar that I felt like an actor who had played in a success for so long that his gestures were second nature to him and he could turn his mind to other things. Because I could overlook Catbird, I felt that I fully existed with him. In this fashion, ten days in the sun went by.

My last morning in Eden dawned like the rest, golden and blue. I went for my early morning swim, and as I was playing dolphin a few yards from the shore, I noticed the glint of metal in the early morning sun. It did not emanate from our beach as I had come to think of it, but from a small cove, separated from it by some rocks and thickets. For reasons I cannot recall, perhaps because I was tired of my game, perhaps because I wished to know all about this limited paradise and thereby possess it more fully, I climbed out of the water to search the little beach, expecting to find nothing more mysterious than a beer can or a ball of tin foil. After pacing the tiny

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strip of sand and shaking the shrubbery for a few minutes, I was almost ready to abandon my quest when my foot struck a corner that was unlike the round rocks underfoot. I pulled back some branches and discovered to my astonishment an old brass-clad chest. It had been battered and bruised as if in some long forgotten hurricane and the metal was so tarnished that I will never know how the sun had flashed it out to my waiting eyes. I was overcome by excitement. My first thought was, of course, that it might be pirate's gold. I wished that Catbird could be here with me and as I pried at the lock, I thought of what he would say when I told him that I could at last pay off my gin rummy debt. I finally took a rock and broke open the lock, my fingers shaking. It was indeed a most extraordinary piece of luggage. If Blackbeard had been a shoplifter rather than a pirate, then this might have been his treasure. There were several bottles of rum and a magnum of champagne, two pairs of English shoes, a lace tablecloth, a Staffordshire dog, a Sterno lamp. Wrapped in a cashmere scarf was a gold cigarette case, which I opened, hoping to find a clue. Inside it set in brilliants were the initials H.M.R. and beneath it the inscription, "With a song in my heart." I wondered whose heart H.M.R. had inspired to make so palpable a contribution. Then there was a pair of silk pajamas and beneath them a pocket book — a crocheted pouch. It was blue and red, larkspur and ruby. I dropped the lid of this safe, horrified at my discovery, but even more at my intrusion. I felt as if I had been caught reading my friend's mail, or worse, his diary. I gave the top of the trunk a slam with my foot down into the

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sand. My foot ached as I ran down into the water and swam out to sea. I kept trying to prevent my mind from forming the names "Mrs. Kungle" and "Catbird." I buried my face in the water, trying to wash away, wash away the chest from my mind. I had swum out as far as I dared. Although experiencing considerable agitation at the thought of returning to the beach, I still found that I preferred to survive, and I turned back. I swam in slowly, blindly, and it was not until I was wading through the clinging water to the land that I saw the fat man dancing about in a state of great agitation. He rushed up to me.

"Great balls of fire, Billy! There's been a catastrophe, a calamity, an outrage! Some bloody body has broken into my trunk! May he sizzle in hell! Must have been one of those thieving natives! Must have come sneaking down to our beach and poked his black nose into everything."

I could hardly look at him. "I'm sorry, Catbird. I opened your trunk. I found it by accident and I didn't think it belonged to anyone, so I opened it. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Forgive you! Forget it! What's mine is yours, such as it is. My green aunt, what a relief! I couldn't think who in the devil it could be. Don't want any light fingers down here," and he laughed in relief and perhaps in self-mockery. I knew that his secret was safe and so did he. "What do you say we go up to the villa and have a beer?"

Chained by his secret, I followed behind his chariot wheels. We sat down at the table. Catbird automatically picked up the cards and won the cut. He riffled them thoughtfully a mo-

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ment, then he shuffled and cut. I dealt ten cards and we picked up our hands.

"What do you think of Miss Ada?" he asked me suddenly. It was not a characteristic question, for while he was always eliciting information, he never bothered about opinions.

"I don't know," I said. "I suppose she's all right. But she's quite a busybody and I'm afraid I don't dig all that Southern charm routine."

"Well, don't sell her short. Old Ada isn't the pinhead people take her for. Not by a long shot. She's pretty rough going most of the time, but she was right there at the head of the line when they handed out the brains. When I first came across her, I was in a pretty tight pickle and she got me out. Maybe not just out of the goodness of her heart, but all the same, she saved the day for me. Anyway, we're just hanging around this burg till we can raise the scratch to get to Miami. Five thousand smackers and our passage, that's all we need. If what we have lined up there comes off, you'll be telling your kids you knew that famous billionaire Carleton B. Stanza way back when — Gin."

Catbird was now another fifty-four points ahead. He whipped out his little pad and wrote it down. He kept score punctiliously and took great pleasure in telling me how much I owed him now at our fabulous hundred-dollar-a-point stakes.

"A funny thing about Miss Ada — only one person in this whole island is onto her. Don't mean to say that anybody likes her any too well, but there's only one person that's called the

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turn on her. Miss Ada told me herself, just as mad as a wet banty. It seems that a few days ago, old Rosella told her she was an adventuress. Well, Miss Ada 'how dared you' and 'well, I nevered' and all that sort of rowdy-dow. Do you know what Rosella said? She said, 'I have never heard of a respectable old lady traveling without any photographs.' Poor Ada was fit to be tied. She didn't like the adventuress bit, but I think it was the 'old' part that really stung. I offered her a couple of snapshots of me, but that didn't seem to fill the bill. Knock with three.

"Now, Billy, don't think I'm talking Dutch uncle to you, exactly. It's just that I've knocked around a lot longer than you have and you're never too young to learn that things are never like they seem. So don't you go playing gin at a hundred dollars a point with just anybody, see?"

Chapter Four

WHEN I RETURNED to the Crooked Mile, I found that the guests were already seated for lunch. Since Madame Bowers had had no definite word from the countess as to the date of her arrival, she had abandoned what I believe must have been the mutually arduous business of eating with us. Our luncheon fell into its habitual pattern. Colonel Bagby was silent and abstracted, Mrs. Bagby told Mrs. Kungle about her son and daughter-in-law in British Guiana, while Mrs. Kungle told Mrs. Bagby about her little grandchildren in Toledo. Miss Floss tried to impress Miss Ada with her intellectual attainments, while Miss Ada tried to overwhelm Miss

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Floss with her exalted connections. After the meal was over I retired to my room. I had promised to meet Catbird at the Troc before dinner and I decided that I was too tired to spend any profitable hours in the interim. I took a shower and lay down, sleeping through the afternoon till a time when the sun had moved half across the house, and left my shades only fitfully lighted. The gentle tap which must have burst my dreams sounded again, and I sat up. Assuming that it was Miss Ada, I made no sound, half hoping that she would tiptoe in on one of her reconnoitering expeditions and that I would have her at a real disadvantage.

But, to my surprise, a soft sweet voice called, "Mr. Axel, are you awake?"

"Yes, Marie Louise. What is it?"

"Madame Bowers. She wishes to have a word, if you would be so kind."

"All right. I'll be down in a minute."

I dressed quickly, putting on my only clean shirt. It was the first time that Rosella had ever asked to see me. I knew that occasionally she had guests to tea, but it seemed a little late in the afternoon for that. In any case, the invitations to tea were rather more ceremonious. In the morning, Marie Louise would deliver the favored one a square lavender envelope. Inside would be written in a hand too florid to be described as copper-plate: *Dear — , Perhaps you will join me for some light refreshment this P.M. Four-thirty sharp. Cordially, R. Bowers. R.S.V.P.* And Marie Louise would stand and wait until she could assure her mistress that Blank would be only

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too flattered. Miss Floss had preserved three of these notes, which she showed me with great pride.

When I entered Rosella's shaded den, I saw that she was reclining on her divan, an empty cup on the table beside her, mute testimony to the fact that tea time was definitely over.

"Ah, Billy," she said, "sit down right here." She indicated the chair next to her. A little awkwardly, I removed a pile of magazines and a Marie Antoinette doll from the chair she had decided upon and sat down.

"I know you don't care for my tisane. No, all you American boys drink is beer, beer, beer. Boys your age do the world over. Well, I don't hold with it. That's why you all lose your hair and end up perfect barrels. Look at the Germans! They all have wrinkles on the backs of their necks by the time they're twenty-five. And you don't have to go that far afield. Look at your friend, Mr. Fat Bird. *He* certainly makes a dainty picture."

It seemed highly unlikely that Rosella had called me in for a temperance lecture, so I held my peace, the only practicable policy in her presence.

"Well," she went on, "that's more or less what I wanted to talk to you about. Oh, not about the beer and all that. Lord knows, I'm always the last one to preach against low company and intemperance. All that sort of tomfoolery is your own business. What I really called you down about is that old charlatan, Ada Lee, and I find I can't go about it without sounding just as whey-faced as she does. I don't have to tell you what she's like. I daresay you've caught her poking through your

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bureau drawers a dozen times. But I have just received a cablegram from Charlottetown. Madame la Comtesse arrives tomorrow and that puts a very different face on the matter. I tell you — and as I am a Christian, it will be so — everything, *everything* must be *comme il faut* as long as Eliane chooses to stay. Don't think I am sweeping the dust under the carpet. Eliane is no child. Indeed, she is utterly sophisticated and that is why she demands absolute decorum. I suppose that is one reason we are such fast chums. But the fact of the matter is that our Miss Lee thrives on scandal and if there isn't any, she'll make it up out of whole cloth. Right now, she is in seventh heaven because, she says, you stay out all night. Now, that's nothing to me. I've never held with tattlers and I know young men, but I must ask you please for the next week or two to use some discretion."

"Actually," I said, "I have just been sleeping on the beach. For no good reason, I mean. I just felt like it."

"Never apologize, never explain. I don't give a rap where you've been or why. Just put a good face on it and we will remain friends, which is how I would like to have it and why I am sounding like such an old motto book. Now, run along if you like and have a last fling. But don't forget what I've said."

I did not know whether to be pleased or offended that Rosella Bowers sided with Miss Ada in seeing me as a rake. The people on Pinta seemed to have joined as unlikely allies to mine my new name and interpret my figure for themselves. I was a little tired of having my lines thrust at me in this fashion and I thought immediately of Catbird, who was will-

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ing to accept me without inferences and instructions. Remembering that I was already late for our engagement at the Trocadero, I told Madame Bowers that I would do my best and departed.

I reached the Trocadero towards sunset, the sunrise of its dark day. Those people who rose with the cocktail hour and faded away after midnight had begun to assemble, those whose frenetic querulous six hours of existence were sustained by highballs. There were waves of faces strange to the daylight, but the face of the fat man was not among them. Christian was sitting at his customary table, however, and a little hesitantly, I approached him, hoping that he might ask me to join him. Ordinarily he was the soul of cordiality but occasionally there came days on which he withdrew politely but definitively behind the panes of his eyes. Then Catbird and I sat at his table restlessly, as if at a séance, until he returned to us or until we were impelled to leave him. If there were phantoms, pleasant or distressing, among whom he traveled then, he never spoke of them. This evening, however, he greeted me warmly. "Good evening, Billy. It has been a long time indeed since we have seen you here. Have you been working so hard, then?"

There was something, not in his words but in his manner, which puzzled me. There was a faint flush on his cheekbones, his eyes shone like cut stones, and there was an exhilaration in his voice which would have made me think he had been drinking if it were not that, despite his long hours in the Trocadero, I knew Christian to be curiously temperate.

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"No," I said, "I'm afraid not. I just haven't been down here."

"If you have not forsworn alcohol like so many of your compatriots, perhaps you will join me in a drink."

"I'd love to, thanks," I said, sitting down. "A daiquiri, please."

"I am always fascinated by your American expression 'the drys.' It is untranslatable, you know. '*Les secs*' would have quite a different connotation."

"As a matter of fact," I told him, "I am down here on Madame Bowers's express orders. She prescribed a last fling."

"So. And I thought she had long since abandoned sending youth to perdition."

"It's not quite that. It seems some countess is coming tomorrow and I am supposed to mind my p's and q's as long as she hangs around."

"*Eh bien*," said Christian with a little sigh. "A countess, and do you know what she is called?"

"Yes. The Countess de Vaucluse. Rosella seems to be really snowed by her. Apparently because she has a little dog she likes better than anybody else and because she doesn't like people to misbehave."

"At what time will she arrive?"

"On the packet, I guess. Around four-thirty or so. Do you know her?" In the light of Christian's strange excitement, the question seemed almost superfluous.

"I used to, yes. I think you will find her very sympathetic —

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la comtesse — in spite of what Rosella tells you. She will stop at the Crooked Mile, then?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. The place is being turned upside-down for her, and all the guests are being fumigated. Rosella has been talking about her ever since I got here, but I thought she was just a figment of the imagination until now. Well, I guess she's real after all."

"More real than either of us, my friend. She has a great presence."

Christian's words unreasonably augmented the preconceived dislike I had formed for the countess. I felt that she threatened the freedom of my days on Pinta, and like a child, I dreaded change.

"I'm supposed to meet Catbird," I said, abandoning the countess. "Have you seen him, by any chance?"

"Why, yes. He has come and gone again without even a drink."

"Really," I said, astounded. "You don't suppose Rosella read him the riot act, too?"

"I believe Rosella to be innocent in this case, for Miss Lee paid us her first visit this afternoon. She was greatly agitated that no one had seen your friend, and left him a note. Poor Murray, who is more romantic than he appears, was longing to open it and I am afraid that it was only my presence which restrained him. He seemed to believe it was a billet-doux. At any rate, when Catbird joined us he gave it to him virtually perspiring with curiosity, but our friend trotted out again the moment he had read it, without giving him the slightest

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satisfaction. I judged by Catbird's face, though I am hardly a student of such matters, that it was not a proposal of marriage, as Murray seemed to hope."

"I wonder if he's coming back?"

Christian shrugged. "Who can tell? It is possible, of course, that at any moment he may carry his bride across the threshold. Miss Lee will be wearing a white lace veil and we shall all drink champagne."

"And Rosella will be the flower girl."

We both laughed. Christian bought me another drink while we let our fancies wander. Finally, looking diffidently at his glass as he spoke, he said, "Since Catbird seems to be detained, perhaps you would do me the honor of dining with me at my house this evening, Billy."

It had never occurred to me that Christian indulged himself in anything so mundane as dinner, and certainly not that he would ever dream of inviting me to accompany him if he did. I was immeasurably flattered and I tried to accept with the proper amount of insouciance.

We walked out to his car, which, although pristine by island standards, would have seemed pitifully lame and battered in New York. As we climbed in, he turned and asked me, "You have seen much of the island, Billy? Not that a day's circuit could not comprehend all that is to be seen on our little Pinta, but perhaps you would choose that I should drive about a little."

"I guess I've seen most of the island," I said, "except for the south shore and all that bit."

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"Ah," he said, "and 'all that bit' belongs to Eliane, your discomfiting countess. When I first came here as a little boy, her father, M. Falaise, owned virtually the entire island. He rode a big white horse and smoked a cigar, and I believed then that he must be the King of the Caribbean."

"Did you live here always then?"

"I was young enough when we arrived so that I rode on my father's shoulder as we descended from the boat. But I was not so young, Billy, that I did not soon cease to be diverted by Pinta. It seemed to me a painfully circumscribed kingdom, a grant of land so insignificant that it could have been stolen from even the smallest continent without a sensation of loss or a reconstruction of the geography books."

"I don't know," I said. "I think it would be rather wonderful to grow up on a place like this. It's so wild and free and I gather it's had quite a history, since I'm always having to stop Miss Floss from telling me about it."

"There, Billy, you make a mistake," he told me. "It is important for those interested in learning as you are, but most particularly for a writer, to see things in time as well as in space. Miss Floss may not be the most appetizing mentor. Me she always disconcerts by addressing as 'Your Grace,' a title I can lay claim to neither by rank nor virtue, but you could do worse than to listen to her. For Pinta, though such a somnolent little island, has had quite a romantic history. It was at the south of the island, down at the bay they still call Port d'Espagnol, that Christopher Columbus is supposed to have stopped for water, as he turned home from his third

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voyage; and so it is that Mont d'Espoir and Port d'Espagnol must have been the old man's last view, as he sailed away, of the new world which had so disappointed him."

"I gather it had been Spanish," I said.

"Oh, yes. You will find we are most cosmopolitan here. The Spanish colonized very near where your town now stands. Up at Beau Séjour, the St. Denis's place, you can find a rock inscribed with the date of their landing. But they didn't last long, the Spanish. They abandoned the island in the seventeenth century, ostensibly because of the plague, but in actuality because they sold out to the Dutch. The Dutch were most frugal housekeepers and the island enjoyed a great state of prosperity till, in a burst of mistaken generosity, they gave it to Mary Stuart and William of Orange among other more imposing wedding gifts. Then poor Pinta was put away with the list of presents and forgotten until the French seized it out of spite when Nelson was in Antigua."

"And they've hung on to it ever since."

"Yes, as you say, they have hung on to it ever since."

"Is the lookout point that Tiger is always sitting on Mont d'Espoir?"

"No. No. That is on the other side of the island, though it might be a fitting name for his vantage point. Poor Tiger. It is just so that I used to sit and just so that I used to dream. But can I speak to him? No. My reassurances would be as empty as words in a high wind. For you cannot speak to a child and say 'and this too will pass,' for what else does a child fear but that? And who knows but what he is right to

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be afraid. For what could I tell him of this state of man but 'I have become what I feared to become and I feel no pain.' Who knows but what the dead lying under the ground say the same? But we are becoming too serious, Billy. I have brought you up here so that we might have a celebration. Since it is not the fourteenth of July nor the first of January, we will call it my birthday, for lack of anything better to call it. We have no fireworks, alas, but we shall bring out some Mouton-Rothschild and drink to many happy hours."

We had been passing along a wooded drive, traveling ever upward, and as he finished, we pulled to a stop outside an impressive stone house. Stone houses were almost unheard of on the island and I decided that at any rate, Christian's family could not have been exiled to Pinta through indigence.

A Great Pyrenees with a graying muzzle and wrinkled dugs, indicative of a long and prolific life, rose from her place between two equally archaic stone dogs and came to meet us. She laid her head on Christian's hand and gazed up at him with eyes milky with age.

"*Enfin, me voici, Fidèle,*" he assured her. "She understands only French," he told me. "So she will not be offended by what I am going to say of her. Nor should she be, for in all she has been a good and faithful dog, but, my friend, so incredibly fertile. Rhea herself could not have done more to populate our world. I can tell you I have made myself very unpopular on this island by my attempts to foist off her ungainly children on my neighbors. My poor Fidèle observes distinctions neither of caste nor color nor, alas, of size and

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some of her experiments have been at best unbecoming. At one time, I gave eight puppies at a stroke to a man from Eau Claire.

I learned later that he was under the misapprehension that they were Australian sheep dogs. I assure you, I made no attempt to delude him. He was a large man, and in the face of those grinning parti-colored monstrosities, it would have seemed incredibly foolhardy. It was a matter of being at cross purposes. I was convinced only that he had an extraordinary sense of fun. But ordinarily I have not so much luck and must beg from door to door. Would you like to walk about a bit while we still have a vestige of light? But perhaps you are faint with hunger. As a rule I dine late, but then I have become so unaccustomed to company that I no longer keep civilized hours."

"No, I'm not awfully hungry," I said.

We entered his house and it was as if I had stepped over a thousand miles of ocean into a French château. The floor was parqueted, the walls were tapestried, the furniture was unobtrusively eloquent. Christian spoke briefly to a little white woman dressed in a plum-colored uniform whose face was so wizened with age that it had become again the face of a baby. Then he turned to me. "Genevieve will give us dinner at eight-thirty. If you care to, we might walk about the grounds."

We went across a terrace and down among some graded gardens. In the daytime there must have been an extraordinary sweeping view of the bay, but the night was falling so swiftly into the sea that I could not do justice to what I saw.

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Fidèle walked stiffly behind us, halting when her master paused.

"An odd house to build on Pinta, you are thinking. I would not have had it so, had it been my choice. I do not believe in too much resistance to one's environment. Though I admit I fret at one condition which this imposes — one which I am sure you will find ironic — that I cannot have a proper garden in this climate. Here in this country where every bush and vine grows to such scandalous extremes, it is too hot and often too dry to cultivate the ordered bloom and shaded lawns which I used to admire so in France."

I looked at his dark gardens which, to my untutored eye, appeared everything that could be desired.

"Oh, well, instead I content myself with the weeds and brambles that pose as garden flowers in this climate. But I fear it takes an exotic nature to find tropical horticulture rewarding."

He rubbed his hand along Fidèle's neck and sighed. "Of course, my dear Fidèle is a contradiction to what I have said against transplanting. I am afraid she suffers terribly from the heat. But then she was given to me by my improvident little sister Léonie and I treasure her doubly on that account. It was on the occasion of my thirtieth birthday and Léonie was married to her Brazilian then. She sailed into the harbor and detonated the most extraordinary series of rockets in honor of the event, which awed and delighted the island children. And before she went away, she presented me with my Fidèle and all because I had a Great Pyrenees of my own before we left

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France. I cried more at leaving poor Hero behind than for all the playmates and kind family at home."

"I didn't even know you had a sister," I said.

"Indeed, yes. And three little nieces. But I see them all too seldom, for Léonie does not love Pinta. Occasionally she steams in here on her yacht, but she never disembarks. I go out to visit her in a shiny white lighter and then I bring her three pretty little girls up here for chocolate. But she will not leave them with me for more than an afternoon, for fear that they will become provincial."

"Where does she live?"

"She is living in Caracas now, married once again, out of the church, of course, to her second South American, a man who purports to be connected with the oil industry, but who, I fear, spends his evenings manufacturing money in the cellar, for she is a lady of truly spectacular extravagance, a quality which endeared her to every South American but her first husband. As yet she seems to have failed to make the slightest impression on this new fortune. I think she finds it almost an affront to her ingenuity that she has been unable to do so. But still she tries valiantly; and, of course, the South Americans who admired her before, worship her now. But I am happy that it has turned out so. Théo, my older brother, always predicted that she would ruin herself with her spend-thrift ways."

"Is Théo still alive?"

"Oh, my God, yes," said Christian with a smile. "And even very active, I believe. His residence is Paris, but at this time

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of year you would never find him there. Ah, here is Marcel to announce dinner. Shall we go in? I believe it has grown too dark in any case for any profitable strolls."

I followed Christian into a charming *chinoiserie* dining room. Dinner, as I had anticipated, was of an excellence seldom encountered in the islands, but Christian paid little attention to it.

He continued to speak of the island. "One day, Billy, I must take you around to the south shore. Your knowledge of Pinta would be incomplete without the sight. But I fear that you would not find it the wonderland that I thought it when I was young, for since the death of Eliane's mother, the plantations have fallen into shocking disrepair. Still the situation remains very beautiful. Of course, part of the charm Ma Folie had for me was undoubtedly the fact that Monsieur Falaise, a man of diversified tastes, kept quite an extensive collection of animals in an improvised zoo not far from the stables. He had naturally a complete aviary, but more exciting to us children were the llamas and tapirs and fauns and boa constrictors. There was a jaguar there which I loved to watch and once a baby chimpanzee, but she died. Eliane, of course, would not go down to the zoo. She did not care for animals."

"Really?" I said. "According to Rosella, her whole life centers around this little Pekingese or whatever it is. Apparently she'd do anything in the world for it."

"Oh, well, one changes, and then, as you may have found, Billy, Madame Bowers's accounts do not always run coinci-

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dent upon the facts. In any case, a Pekingese is rather more of an insect than an animal."

I felt secretly pleased, as it seemed to me that the countess had been taken down a notch.

"It was Monsieur Falaise who first taught me to shoot," Christian continued, "though he would not have harmed a living creature. Still he practiced daily, as I do."

"Oh, is all that shooting yours?"

"Every day I shoot from ten to eleven in the morning and from four to five in the afternoon, if that is what you mean. You see, like many old bachelors, I am confirmed in my ways. I would be delighted if you would join me some afternoon, Billy. Or perhaps you do not care for the sport."

"I don't really know much about it," I said.

"At least you are honest, my friend. Now Madame Bowers will tell you that she is a crack shot. She arrived on this island with a little pearl-handled revolver, under the impression, I believe, that the natives would be more aggressive or perhaps less discriminating than they have since turned out to be.

She used to come out with me occasionally, dressed in the most outrageous costume and then, my God, it took nerves of steel not to seek sanctuary! Finally, she almost got the old groom in the calf and then I put a stop to the whole business. I told Madame Falaise about it, for Rosella was living with her at Ma Folie at the time and she ordered her boy to fill up Madame Bowers's pistol with blanks from then on."

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"You mean, Rosella was really living down *there*?" I said, surprised.

"Oh, for three years or more. Falaise was dead long since, of course, and Eliane was in Paris. How Léonie laughed when I told her. She said she could just imagine them sitting in the garden by the fountain like a travesty of sacred and profane love."

When we had finished with dinner, we had coffee and brandy under the portico while gazing across the unsatisfactory garden to the sea. Christian gave me a fine cigar, which I puffed at mightily, hoping that I might develop more of a taste for that smoke than I had had heretofore. Once again, I admired the beauty of the view.

"Yes," said Christian, "this is a lovely island. I must admit that life here is very pleasant, and even seductive. Of course, Billy, only the horizon is your boundary and you must find our sphere here very small indeed, but it is not a bad thing to live on an island. However petty it may appear, we islanders have an illusion of completeness. Of course, transients like you have a curious effect upon us. You seem very knowledgeable and we welcome the ideas and the news which you bring, but equally we fear that what you bring may upset our delicate balance.

There is a pleasure we all fancy in talking long and perhaps indiscreetly to a stranger. But I have found that life is the fullest when it is the most reduced, that is to say, distilled, or refined, like a liquid. And to share it indiscriminately, even though your confidant be gone on the morrow,

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is to adulterate it. Remember the story of King Midas and the rushes. One requires a discipline."

After this, Christian lapsed into silence and the only indication I had of his presence was the rhythmic glowing of his cigar. I was egotist enough to believe that he was making some oblique reference to me, and perhaps to Catbird and me. I wondered what he knew and how he had gained this knowledge. It was not until much later that I realized that he was talking only of himself.

After Christian drove me back to the Crooked Mile, I did not go in, but waited until his headlights faded away, and then started down to my beach. If this was to be my last night of freedom, then I would make the most of it. I did not take a flashlight, for by this time I had become so familiar with the path that I could have navigated it blindfold. In any case, there was a bright tropical moon that night, which lit my way like a lesser sun.

Once on the beach, contrary to my habit, I did not go swimming, but sat on a box and gazed out to sea, thinking about Christian and Catbird and the island. I have no idea how long I sat there. I only know that my trance was broken by a teasing light, like an irrelevancy in a dream, jumping about the treetops. I turned and heard the puffs and grunts that heralded Catbird's arrival, and I followed his erratic progress lit fitfully by his flashlight down the rocks. Al-

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most before I knew it, he was beside me and the beam was directed blindingly into my face.

"Well, call me the baboon's uncle," he bellowed, "if it isn't that well-known terror of the wild west, Billy the Kid. How's business, 'Kid'?"

"Catbird," I said, "you're drunk as a lord. What on earth are you doing down here?"

"Drunk-shmunk. I'm much better than drunk, my boy. I was carried down here on wings of song. Why, I just bobbed down here like a feather blown by the merry little breezes."

By this time, Catbird had dropped the flashlight, but he did not sit down. He was dancing around in a state of manic delight.

"Catbird, you *are* drunk. What in the world has happened?"

"What's happened. Just wait till you hear. You'll turn sky-blue pink. The damndest thing in the world has happened. Why, I'm not drunk, I'm loaded. Your uncle Catbird is a millionaire, a real honest to Matilda millionaire, and all you can say is, 'What's happened?' "

"Oh, Catbird, for God's sake, tell me."

"Well, dear boy, I suppose you weren't even born or perhaps even thought of when I went to Tasmania with Lord Humphrey Nuthatch in fourteen hundred and ninety-two — but you won't mind my saying I was a great success. Why, all the bushmen went crazy over me. This naked chieftain ran up and handed me a popsicle. Well, I bit into it and what do you think I found —"

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"Catbird, what has Rosella got to do with it?"

"What has Rosella got to do with it? This is what she has to do with it." Catbird ripped open his shirt. I needed no flashlight to identify the three strands of pearls wrapped around his neck. They shone like tear drops in the moonlight.

"Catbird," I exclaimed, "those are Rosella's pearls! What on earth are you doing with them?"

"They *were* Rosella's pearls, you mean. The old girl is pearl-less as any Horn & Hardart oyster now. And while I've never been one to give credit where credit is due, I've got to admit that it's all due to the Ada. She may be a green-faced old spook, but what she doesn't know ain't worth knowing. She fixed her beady eye on those pearls and she finally found out how to hook 'em. You may not believe it, but old Rosella takes a bath once a week — whether she needs it or not. That's the only time she takes off the pearls. That mammy of hers wraps her up in a kimono and takes her off to some big vat to leeward and gives her a real old-fashioned scrubbing. And when she takes her bath, she puts the pearls in this big brass vase by the window. 'O.K., Ada,' I said, 'and how do you think I can sneak in there and hook the pearls? I'm no shadow you know.' So she says, 'Well, Carleton, you just wait outside her window. When I give you the signal, you climb up the tree with a fishpole and just fish them out.' So there I stood for about three blooming hours, sweating a river under old Rosella's window until finally Miss Ada pokes her head out of her window and says, 'Pssst. Climb the tree.' I don't

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know how she knew the old girl was in the bath. I guess she must have heard the splash. Anyway, I shinnied up the tree and started fishing for the pearls. It wasn't any lead-pipe cinch, let me tell you. Old Ada is leaning out the window hissing away. 'Don't you fall out of the tree,' she says, 'or somebody might hear.' Fat lot she'd care if I broke my fool neck, as long as I did it on the Q.T. Anyway, I finally got them. And, well, here we are."

"Good Lord!" I said. "They'll catch you in a *minute*."

"Catch me — I'd like to see 'em! Number one, they have to find the pearls before they can hang it on anybody, and believe me, they won't find 'em. Number two, nobody will believe that they were swiped. They'll think that old crack-pot was playing she was Lady Godiva or something and just chucked them away. Number three, they won't think anyone could've got at 'em without Rosie or Mammy spotting 'em. Number four, even if they do figure they were stolen, they'd pin it on one of the natives. Why, Billy boy, we're fourteen carat gold! I wouldn't call the king my cousin. All we have to do is play tit-tat-toe till the heat's off, and then smuggle them out. And that, old pal, is where you enter the reel."

"What do you mean? What do you want *me* to do?"

"Well, to begin with, everyone here thinks you're the original straight arrow. They'd as soon suspect that dub of a governor they have here. So you could take them up to San Juan easy as getting from here to tomorrow. Then all you have to do is get in touch with your fence and send us the dough and off we buzz."

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"Catbird! I can't do that," I cried, too alarmed to try to bluff. "In the first place, I haven't got a fence."

"Oh, jump off it, Billy. It's just your Uncle Raffles. I heard what you said about those diamonds, even if Frenchy missed it. I know that may have been a one-shot, but this time, kid, you've made your fortune. All you have to do is unload the stuff. It must be worth a couple of hundred grand at least. Look here, if you sell the pearls you can keep half the take. That ought to keep you in mink doorstops for a while. Sainted Auntie, I'm not greedy. All I really care about is that measly five thou. Anyway we'll split the other half and call it quits."

"No, really, Catbird. It isn't that — "

"Anyway you have to. It may be vulgar to discuss money matters, as my old granny used to say, but strictly *entrez nous*. Ada and I between us haven't got the scratch to get off this place. You can't say we haven't tried, but we just haven't got it. We've got about enough for one of us to get to Charlottetown. Now, would you believe it, Ada won't trust me as far as Charlottetown. I ask you. What could I do in Charlottetown? In any case, I'm not such a silver-plated jackass as to let her go off on her lonesome. Why she'd tear the page with Carleton B. Stanza's name on it right out of that little red address book of hers and let me stay on this rock till I got as skinny as you. No, sink or swim, we stay together, me and the Ada. And that means *your* number's up, Billy boy."

Further protest seemed useless at the moment, so, although filled with misgivings, I said nothing more. Catbird was

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fascinated by the pearls. He kept running them through his fingers.

"You know, one thing," he said, "it's funny, but I'd give all I've got in my pockets to know just where the old crook got these babies. Ten to one, it was Old King Cole from Cloud Cuckoo Land. I've heard he was the number one boy in her black book. These old floozies always choose the strangest things to be respectable about."

At last he picked up the flashlight and said to me, "Come on, Billy. I'm going to put my jewels in the safe deposit box. You can't be too careful these days, you know. There are a lot of itchy fingers around."

We waded out beyond the rocks which separated us from the little cove. Once the trunk was opened, Catbird pulled out most of its strange contents. Finally he found what he wanted, a Paisley shawl. He wrapped the pearls tenderly in this before burying them beneath the avalanche of curios. Then he beamed at me. "Well," he said, "no satisfaction like a job well done, eh, Billy? What do you say we have a beer?"

Chapter Five

I LOOKED AT my watch and saw that it was eight-thirty. This seemed an unprecedented hour to be awake and I cursed all the anonymous padding feet and palpable bustle which had roused me. In a slow stream, the events of the past night ran through my mind, and getting up hurriedly, I pulled on my clothes. "They must have found out about the pearls," I thought, "and they're going to search the place." I felt a hard lump in the pit of my stomach and then I managed to be detached enough to wonder whether it were due to conscience or fear. Since I had made up my mind to dispense with my conscience, I decided that it must be fear, and after pausing

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a moment to adjust my attitude before the mirror, I opened my door. I had scarcely taken a step into the corridor when I was struck by an object traveling at high velocity. With some difficulty, I disentangled myself from Miss Ada Lee, who, separated into her various arms and legs, apologized profusely.

"Oh, my goodness, Mr. Axel, you must forgive me, indeed you must. It was all my fault. I declare I just wasn't looking where I was going. Yes, indeedy, I'm all right. No bones broken and no feelings hurt, I hope. I was just stepping down to see if it were possible to discover why there should be so much hustle-bustle over the arrival of one lone female. Why, you'd think it was the Second Coming the way everyone is carrying on."

"What do you mean?" I said, confused.

"Well, at eight o'clock this morning, Mary Lou spotted that old packet. Why, you'd think it was Noah sighting land, from all the hubbub all those niggers made, whooping and carrying on. I tried to ascertain just what it was that made that old packet so noteworthy that everyone was making noise to raise the dead, and all I could discover was that they believed that French woman who Miss Bowers has been turning everything topsy-turvy for was on board."

"But the packet never comes in the morning," I said stupidly.

"Mr. Axel, according to Miss Bowers, the very stars in the firmament would change their courses for this French person, so surely you would not question the fact that the Charlottetown packet breaks its habit of years immemorial, putting

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everyone at a great inconvenience, to be obliging. As I understand it, she can't even call herself French, because she comes right off this island and you know what that means. Why, Mr. Axel, I would not miss this occasion for one million Confederate dollars. My friends will certainly laugh when I write home that the high light of the social season on Pinta was the arrival of a Negro countess."

And she scurried off down the corridor, trying at the same time to pull on her gloves and to fasten her opal brooch more securely over a spot on her black dress.

I wondered whether it were possible that Rosella had not yet discovered the loss of her pearls. It seemed inconceivable that she had not. It was impossible to picture her without them. They seemed like globes of her life fluid. I hoped ardently that she had long since become aware of their loss and perhaps had gone through a deal of the ranting and wailing associated with her bereavement. "In any case," I thought, "I might as well have breakfast," and I lingered with a feeling close to pleasure over my new growth of cynicism.

I found the kitchen deserted. Marie Louise, it seemed, was helping Madame Bowers with her toilet. The five little Negro maids were down at the dock. Only the huge purple cook Ophélie remained on guard and she seemed to be in a state of semi-shock. I soon gathered that there was no breakfast to be had, at least for the present. I managed to find a *croissant* in the breadbasket, and this I carried off to my seat on the porch and crumbled sullenly, chalking up one more mark against the countess.

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None of the other guests at the Crooked Mile were even audible. And I concluded with disgust that they must have all rushed down to the dock like a group of adolescent autograph hounds to meet the countess. Presently, however, the screen door opened and Colonel Bagby limped out. He nodded to me and settled himself with one of his huge tomes at the far end of the porch. A vast wave of fellow feeling swept over me at the sight of this good and sensible old gentleman. I had observed him very little before, beyond noticing that the titles of the works he tackled were more weighty and provocative than his decorative appearance would have suggested that he could digest, and now I chided myself for my irreverence. I watched him with a new interest as he read. He would absorb himself in the pages for several minutes, then he would close the book decisively as if never to open it again, while he stared thoughtfully into space, his finger tips touching. Then he would reopen the volume and make a marginal note before resuming his reading. I admired his method and his concentration, particularly since in the past few moments of his study, a series of peacock screams had begun to emanate from Rosella's quarters.

In staccato succession, she accused Marie Louise in high-decibel French of secreting her stays, her scent, her silver-buckled shoes, her stockings, her chemise, her petticoats.

"Oh, Lord, now we're really for it," I thought.

Her scarab bangle. Her clip.

"Now or never."

Her leghorn with the poppies.

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"She must know," I thought. After this raucous inventory, there was a long ominous silence. I began cracking my knuckles, a nervous habit I had thought to have abandoned in my early teens.

An agitation among the colored crowd who had assembled silently before the Crooked Mile mercifully drew my attention. There was a burst of cheers as the governor's limousine, driven by a smart ebony chauffeur, halted before the steps. Marie Louise shot across the porch and down the stairs, thrust a bouquet of orchids into Tiger's hand, whispered in his ear, and ran back into the inn.

Colonel Bagby finally looked up, muttered something that sounded like "Piffle," and shuffled back into the house. The chauffeur seemed to be having trouble with the doors of the limousine. Another car drew up piled high with luggage, and yet a third, from which craned Miss Floss, Mrs. Kungle, Mrs. Bagby, and Miss Lee. For Pinta, this constituted a veritable motorcade. The door of the second car opened and a silver-haired lady in a smart dark suit descended. Tiger marched down the stairs like a small automaton.

"À la plus jolie femme de l'île," he said in his little tinny voice, thrusting the bouquet into her arms. His face, however, was averted and he clearly disclaimed all responsibility for the act.

"Oh, my God," groaned a baritone voice behind me. "The little bastard has given them to the maid."

I turned to face Rosella Bowers. Her lips and her eyelids were heavily painted. Her hair was arranged into a series of

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gravity-defying poufs beneath a swooping hat. Her figure appeared regal rather than shapeless beneath a flowing gown of beautifully figured chiffon and lace. Diamonds sparkled on her hands and wrists, and wrapped around her neck in shimmering loops were the famous King Ludovic pearls.

My hands began to shake. An unreasoning despair more acute than the anxiety I had felt heretofore overcame me, and it appeared to me then that the whole scene had the dreadful inevitability of a Seurat painting and that we remained immobile, she in her position of triumph, I in my attitude of dismay. I scarcely took cognizance of the resumption of motion when the chauffeur finally prized open the door of the limousine and handed out a small dark woman in gray, when Rosella billowed past me down the steps, when she enveloped the woman in two chiffon arms . . . I began to shake my head.

"Ah, *ma chère*," she cried. "*Ma plus chère Eliane! Quel plaisir de te revoir.*" Then she drew back and began to cluck at something hidden from me. "*La, la, la, la. C'est mon petit amour, n'est-ce pas? C'est mon petit Robespierre.*"

"*Mais non*," said a small clear voice. "*Hélas j'ai eu besoin de trouver un nouvel ami.* Let me introduce to you Prince Sam. My friends do not endure like your beautiful pearls, Rosella."

"The pearls," said Rosella. "They are the only thing I have to remind me of my triumphs on the stage. In fact, they would be nothing at all to me, except that I spent so many years of my girlhood earning them. Once old Jerome Bethlehem,

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the American banker, sent me six strands of Orientals. He wrote that I had brought tears to his eyes for the first time in thirty years in my rendition of 'The Barbary Lassie,' so of course he wanted me to add these pearls to my collection and to come around for supper the next evening. Of course I sent them right back. 'Mr. Bethlehem,' I wrote, 'the career of an actress may be fleeting, but when I leave the stage I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I alone will have bought my freedom, and I can say then that each of my pearls was an honest night's work, which, as I daresay you know, is more than most women can say of their jewelry. So, Mr. Bethlehem, I must decline your pearls and your kind invitation.' My letter was reprinted in all the dailies."

By this time, I had managed to get to my feet and flee from this nightmare onto the road, the dirt road that led to the Trocadero. I began to run, the idea fixed in my mind that if I could only find Catbird, I would be safe. I pushed into the Trocadero, but it was shaded and empty. Murray, who had been whistling tonelessly as he stacked glasses, gave me an unfriendly stare.

"The bar's not open, kid," he said. "When I start serving drinks before breakfast, I'll send you a card."

"Has Catbird been here?" I panted.

"He didn't spend the night, if that's what you mean," said Murray rudely, turning his back.

I fell out into the square and made my way over to the Hôtel de l'Europe.

"Is Mr. Stanza in?" I demanded of the cold-eyed hotel

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clerk. He looked at me distastefully, then turned to the honeycomb of wood which held the keys.

"Mr. Stanza's key is here, so it is probable that he has not returned yet." As I started off blindly, he called after me, "You might tell Mr. Stanza, if you find him, that the manager, Monsieur Dulac, is anxious to speak with him." The sun was blazing in the street, blazing as if it would set the world on fire, and I repeated "Catbird, Catbird" over and over to myself. I turned this way and that, uncertain of where to go, till on a sudden thought, I raced off up the hill. At last I reached the white steps on which I had sat so long ago. I hesitated before the door, the first voluntary pause in my search, a little abashed by my predicament. Finally I pulled myself together and rang the bell. There was the dulcet sound of chimes and in a minute the door was opened to me by a Negress with gold hoops in her ears. We regarded one another in silence.

"Is Catbird here?" I stammered.

Her face broke into a sweet smile. "M'sieur Catbird. *Oui. Oui. Il est dans la maison.*" She led me through the hallway and up the stairs and onto a terrace, where lolling upon a chaise longue, surrounded by an aviary of twittering mulattoes, was my friend. A little colored girl was feeding him grapes, and she paused in her occupation, her hand in mid-air, at my wild-eyed appearance.

"Oh, Catbird," I cried.

Catbird extended a pudgy hand to me. In his magniloquent pose, he was Nero, done by Cecil B. De Mille.

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"Why, Billy," he shouted. "You old rag-eared rascal! Why didn't you tell me you were coming here?"

"Catbird," I said, "thank God I've found you. I've got to talk to you."

"Plenty of time for that," he said grandly. "Come and have a little breakfast first. I'm living on credit now. Wonderful feeling. If you like, you can even have one on the house," and he gave me a broad wink.

"No, no," I said, almost sobbing in my frustration. "It's terribly important, really. You've got to come away from here this minute."

"Sweet sinks, Billy! Don't sound as though you're working for the Salvation Army," but, albeit reluctantly, he heaved himself to a sitting position. "Adieu for now, my nut-brown wench," he bellowed, and gave the little colored girl a playful slap. "So long, girls. I'll be back before you know it to brighten this little corner."

"Well, tee off, Billy," he said to me when we were once outside the house. He had lost his jocularly and his face was deadly serious. "What's afloat? I suppose Rosie's in a ta-ra-ra about the pearls."

I shook my head. The words were so incredible that I had difficulty shaping them. "Rosella was *wearing* the pearls," I said finally.

"Either I'm deaf or you're dumb," said Catbird seizing me by the shoulder. "Say what you just said *again*."

"Rosella came down to meet the countess this morning and she was wearing the pearls."

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"Well, strike me with a shovel," said Catbird and his steely grip on my shoulder belied the vestigial appearance of his arms. Then he took off his hat and began running his fingers through his curly hair.

"You must be kidding. It's impossible, Billy, plain four syllable impossible. I'll see for myself."

He began to walk swiftly through the town, talking as he strode along, and I kept up as best I could.

"If that bitch Ada Lee has sold us out to be teacher's pet with old Rosie, I'll have her mailed out of here special delivery in pieces no bigger than a postage stamp."

He wiped his dripping brow with the back of one hand. "No, no, I'm sure it wasn't the Ada. She knows I could blow the whistle on her and send her to Fed for twenty years."

He gave me a long penetrating look. Then he said, "Well, I trust you, Billy boy. Honor among thieves, you know. But what I can't figure out is why two of those big brown boys in blue haven't come to cart me off to the pokey."

When we reached the Crooked Mile, I could see that the excitement had by no means diminished. The crowd over the lawn made the place look as if a reception was in progress. At the head of the steps, Rosella loomed, like the top figure on a pyramid. Catbird stopped and shaded his eyes against the sun. Then he turned to me.

"You go to the head of the class, Billy lad. I can see them with my own twenty-twenty. Well, there's three hundred thou back in the pot." He looked down at his hands.

"Billy boy, your Uncle Catbird's got to admit that this

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turn of events makes him a little put out. Sweet-singing giraffes, how I'd love to go down and see what else they got, but I suppose we'd find one of those big black Dick Tracys standing over our chest with a shot gun."

"Not now," I said. "I think everyone on the island must be here on Rosella's lawn to see the countess. I'm sure even the police can't resist rubbernecking."

"You're a genius, Billy. Well, then, off we trot to never-never land. I suppose you know we're acting downright anxious to see the insides of this primitive clink." We hurried off down the road, through the trees, over the rocks. By the time we reached the rock pool, Catbird and I were both pink and wet.

"Now play cat, Billy boy. Just two buddies out for a stroll on a sunny day." And darting sideways glances from his bright little eyes, he advanced crabwise to the spit of rocks.

"Dandy place for a champagne picnic, Billy lad," he called, and then peering over the rocks, he beckoned me on. We waded around the spit and I could see that the fat man's teeth were chattering.

"It looks too good, chum," he told me. "I know the minute I pull that handle, one of those dicks is going to pop up like a big black jack-in-the-box."

"Oh, no," I said. "I'm sure they're not that subtle." But I was far from convinced myself. We circled the trunk like wary animals.

"Stand off, Billy," said Catbird finally. "The blasted thing's probably mined." Then with a burst of bravado, he flung

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open the lid. Nothing happened. The sun shone. The birds circled. The sea lapped. "Well, let's see what else that nasty little keyhole climber sneaked," said Catbird. "Neat little joker. Left everything just where he found it, may he burst on Palm Sunday. What's this?" he said a moment later and then he let out a strange strangled sound, something between a scream and a gulp. Between his thumb and forefinger he held the pearls we had put there so carefully the night before. He let them drop as if they were red hot. Then he flopped down upon the sand and began to fan himself with his hat.

"Well, roll up the wagon and tell them to take me away," he said. "I'm done. They've done me. I'm done." I stood there staring at him helplessly, my mind in a turmoil. Suddenly his face broke and he gave a great roar of laughter and scrambled to his feet.

"Why that old fraud!" he cried. "That old queen of the phonies. King Ludovic! I'll bet he was an acrobat. Never trust a woman, Billy. I tell you, never trust a one of them. Why I'll bet she has sixty like 'em and if you sold 'em all you still couldn't pay your way in the five and dime." He shook his head. "Well, I've got to give it to the old rhinoceros. She had me one hundred and fifty per cent buffaloed. Why, I'll bet she and that black mammy were peering out the window the whole time I was thrashing around in that tree with that confounded fishpole, laughing their sides out." A thought struck him and he began to laugh again until he had to wipe his eyes. "Oh, my scarlet soul," he cried, "I'd do five hundred years in Purgatory to have seen the Ada's face when she

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got a gander at Rosie's decorations. You didn't happen to notice, did you?" I shook my head. "I guess not. Well, I bet Bette Davis couldn't do anything to touch it. Come on, Billy. This is a show I wouldn't miss." And he set off up the beach.

When we reached the Crooked Mile, Rosella was still holding court, albeit an entirely feminine court, on the veranda. The ladies of the house were clustered around her, hanging on her words, with the exception of Miss Ada, who sat sullenly apart, twiddling with her teaspoon. The countess and her maid seemed to have been swallowed into the house.

"Well, top of the morning, Ada," bellowed Catbird. "What's in that tea, a pickle?" he roared with laughter. "And greetings, ladies. Miss B., I hear by the grapevine you've got a visiting fireman."

Mrs. Bowers sucked in her breath and turned a startling color. I was literally in terror that she would reach into her handbag and pull out a thunderbolt, or worse, the pearl-handled revolver. But to my relief, she let her breath out again with a puff and smote him instead with words.

"I can only believe, Mr. Stanley, that you have my front door confused with the trade entrance which is around to the back. Perhaps Marie Louise has been so kind as to save you something. I see that dear Diable has been fed."

The fat man looked over his shoulder to see his enemy, the yellow dog, strolling around the corner of the house. He scrambled onto the porch with alacrity saying, "Oh, look now, Miss B., you wouldn't leave me down in the arena with that wild beast, would you?"

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He seated himself unself-consciously and Mrs. Bowers drew her chair an inch farther back with an expression of distaste.

"As I was saying," she continued loftily, "I think of dear Eliane not as a new visitor but as an old friend, a dear, dear friend, a little sister."

"I'll bet her little brother is Methuselah," said Catbird to me.

"The thing I admire so particularly about Eliane is that she is so completely unspoiled. You might think that a woman with Eliane's complexion and Eliane's money might lose the common touch, but I tell you, and it is so, that Eliane is as sweet a child today as she was in pinafores. And my word, so generous. Why, when she lost her little dog, that dear little Robespierre, she was nearly frantic. She gave the woman who found him a check for a million francs. How I wish I could have seen that woman's face."

"When she tried to cash it," muttered Catbird.

"Did Mr. Stanley make some sort of noise?" Rosella said to no one in particular.

"No, no. I was only telling my friend Billy here about the time I showed old Livingstone the way to Timbuctu."

There was a long and deadly silence. Mrs. Kungle coughed and Miss Floss gave a nervous giggle. At this moment, the screen door opened and the countess was with us. We all rose, with the exception of Rosella and Catbird.

"Oh, please, I beg of you. Do not get up. Here, I will sit next to Mrs. Bowers, and we can all be quite comfortable."

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Rosella made no introductions. She obviously felt that the countess did not need one, and that none of us merited one.

"You must be quite faint, my love, after your taxing journey," began Rosella. "You must take some coffee and *croissants* and I will have Ophélie coddle you an egg." Her attitude was in marked contrast to the disdain with which she treated most matters pertaining to her guests' comfort.

The countess clasped her hands in mock despair. "Do not, I beg you, Rosella dear. That would make for me the third breakfast of the morning. Jeannette and I had fruit and coffee before we left Charlottetown, and then upon the boat, I found that the captain, with misplaced kindness, had prepared for me a table groaning under all manner of aromatic delicacies. Fish for breakfast, can you imagine anything more British? But how could I displease him? So I ate like a young musketeer. But now, Rosella, if you bring me another breakfast, I will burst into tears."

Rosella sighed, "I should have remembered, my dear, that all you ever lived on was fruit juice and black coffee."

"That's all Mr. Kungle had before his ulcer," broke in Mrs. Kungle unexpectedly. "After that he had to have three glasses of milk and a bowl of cream of wheat and no coffee at all."

Rosella shot her a glance which commanded silence, but the countess, though mystified by the reference, smiled in interested sympathy. I had noticed nothing beyond the countess's general shape and color upon her arrival, but now that I had a chance to observe her, I was disarmed by her youth

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and beauty. My ideas of countesses were rather hazy and mostly derived from the stage and picture screen. I had expected either Estelle Winwood or Ava Gardner, but certainly not this serene face with its delicate bones, silver skin, and huge violet eyes the color of the early evening. Her black hair was drawn back into a knot beneath a large pale hat, and even the cool cream dress into which she had changed enchanted me. It had a chic which even my untutored eye acknowledged, a kind of maturity belied by the freshness of her skin and the vigor of her carriage. I decided she must be at least thirty, but she looked more like a young girl captured by a determined couturier than a woman bounded by the words "widow" and "millionairess." It was a kind of masquerade which delighted me. I canceled all the countess's marks in one magnanimous gesture.

There came a series of strange squawks from the interior of the Crooked Mile and Eliane sprang to her feet. "Oh, how could I be so thoughtless," she cried, and ran over to the screen door. She held it open and a hideous little hairless black dog strutted out.

"Oh, what a dear little Chihuahua," cried Mrs. Bagby.

The countess scooped him up and carried him back to her chair. "Yes, he is my dearest comfort," she said. "I call him Prince Sam, but I am afraid I should have chosen a less exalted title, for he has become almost insufferable and will brook no opposition. Did you hear the imperious fashion in which he summoned me to open the door? I promise you, I will call my next dog Ragamuffin and then perhaps we shall

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have some peace." Prince Sam continued to lie in his mistress's lap in a state of torpor. It was hard to imagine that he would make a very lively pet.

Eliane flung Catbird and me an apologetic smile. "You must forgive a childless woman her eccentricities," she said.

The fat man, usually so glib, said nothing, but continued to gape at her.

Then Rosella took over the conversation to tell of a pug the Duke of St. Giles had given her, which stood on its heels when she sang "God Save the King." In the middle of this discourse, the countess gave a little start and said, "Please, Rosella, what is that noise? It sounds just as if someone were shooting up in the hills."

"Oh," I said, eager to display my knowledge, "that's Christian de Monceau. He always shoots for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon."

"Indeed," said the countess with a curious expression. Then, turning to Rosella, she said, "I had heard that Monsieur de Monceau had remained on this island, but I could not believe it. What, Rosella, can he have found to occupy himself here, beyond his shooting?"

"Like your father and his father, too, Eliane, Christian is a planter and a gentleman of leisure. Indeed I may say that he is a true gentleman, a type which is unfortunately becoming almost extinct in this day of twopenny imitations and rowdies," and she let her eye linger on my fat friend.

"How can he be a planter?" said Eliane. "He has no plantation."

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"But Eliane, you must have heard that Théodore inherited the uncle's title and Christian took over the plantation. He has bought all that piece down by Romney's Creek to boot."

"No, no, I did not know," said the countess. Then she lapsed into silence and let Rosella's words flow over her. At length she stood up.

"You must excuse me, Rosella. I have business in town with Monsieur Armand and it would be discourteous of me to keep him waiting."

"Wait, wait," said Rosella, heaving to her feet. "I will tell Dominique to drive you in."

"No, I beg you. It is my custom to walk many miles a day and then, Rosella, you must remember that it is half my life-time since I have been on my island. You must give us a chance to become reacquainted."

And including us all in her smile, she set off down the path with Prince Sam at her heels. Rosella stood watching her for a minute and then, without another word, retreated into the house. Miss Ada Lee gave a sniff and followed her, hissing "Idiot" as she passed Catbird. And the other three ladies after little appreciative murmurs about the countess's beauty and charm, strolled off together to find Dominique, who was to take them on a trip to the south shore.

Catbird and I sat silently, like packages waiting to be called for. Finally he turned to me.

"Well, that's the McCoy," he said.

There was another long silence. Then suddenly he jumped up with a burst of exuberance.

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"By the red, white, and blue, Billy boy, I'll ask her to marry me. I've never thought much about holy matrimony before, but you have to look into it sometime and they say she's a regular walking Fort Knox," and he peered off down the path over which the countess had passed as if it might yield gold coins. "Would that make me a count?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, that's just as well. I don't want to sound high hat." He turned with an afterthought. "And mind you, not a word to the Ada."

Chapter Six

BILLY," SAID CATBIRD to me the next afternoon. "Be a pal, will you? That jealous old bitch Ada Lee isn't more than two per cent sold on the idea of my being Count Stanza, and when I made a date to take the countess dancing tonight, she stuck that old nanny nose of hers right in and asked herself along."

"The countess is going dancing with *you*?" I asked in great surprise. It seemed incredible.

"Sure. We were going to tread the light fantastic, just the two of us, till in butts Ada. She's still in a high flier about Rosie's glass beads, of course. 'Where's your sense of humor,

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Ada,' I told her yesterday. Of course, you couldn't find her sense of humor with an eight-inch drill. 'Sense of humor,' says she. 'It's one thing to have a sense of humor and it's another to be downright deranged.' Well, I told her if she tries to flat my tire on this, she won't see a one of those aristocratic dollars; but all the same, I'd just as soon you went along to sit on her face just in case. Would you do it for me, kid? My party, of course, but I know she's no queen of the May."

"Okay," I said.

"And by the way, Billy boy, I wonder if you could lend me a little of the green and white. I don't want Murray giving me the fishy stare tonight, and I'll pay you back if I strike oil."

"Sure," I said. "As much as you like. But where are we going to dance?"

"At the Troc, of course. It's Saturday night, you know."

"Oh."

I did not find the prospect of the evening ahead inviting. In twenty-four hours the countess had done much to alter my attitude. Far from disturbing the pattern of our day, she had seemed to enhance it, without really changing it.

Somewhat to my surprise, she had taken both lunch and dinner with us and made our group a party rather than a chance meeting. Her power was hard to define, for she was far from being talkative and was perhaps even a little grave, yet I had never felt more desire to please than when performing to her responsive smile. Her effect seemed equally alchem-

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ical upon the other guests. Miss Ada and Miss Floss abandoned their bickering, Colonel Bagby began to contribute odd wry little anecdotes, and Rosella's monologues seemed less prodigious. Even the food improved.

So, now I felt my allegiances divided. While I was anxious for Catbird's success, I found his aspirations ludicrous. And I was ashamed to discover that I was a little worried that the countess would think less of me for my association with the fat man. Not that I had any reason to assume she thought well of me. Her manners seemed to be the same to everyone — a kind of cordiality tempered with diffidence — but I did think, perhaps too boldly, that she liked me. I had been unreasonably disappointed when Marie Louise told me that she was lunching out today and I had sat on the porch for almost an hour after lunch before I had decided to go down to the beach, ashamed at my foolishness and afraid that if the countess returned she would realize that I was more than half waiting for her.

But now I became a little disgusted by my own fickleness, and I promised myself that if it seemed at all feasible, I would aid my friend in his project.

The countess was not to dine with us that evening. She deplored to me the necessity of talking business all through dinner, but promised that she would return in time for us to

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leave for the Trocadero at nine. To my surprise, she actually seemed to be looking forward to our little outing.

"I feel quite like a girl again," she told me. "I haven't been to a night club for years and years, and it will be such a happy change from talking finances over the soup spoons." It seemed strange to me that the countess was the only person on the island who allowed business to impinge upon her round of activities.

After dinner I retired to my room to tidy up and to pick up my traveler's checks. While I was combing my hair, Catbird pushed his way into my room, panting heavily.

"I can tell you, Billy boy, it'll be a treat to get back to the land of the free where they have elevators. What a climb! Whew! And worse than that — the countess has vanished!"

"No, she hasn't," I said. "She just went out to dinner, and she told me that she would be back in plenty of time." It was not yet eight-thirty.

"Out to dinner? With who? Who's the dirty squirrel trying to climb my tree?"

"No one as far as I know. It was a business engagement."

"Really? Well, I suppose that's jake. Just don't want her squandering our silver," and he laughed. "Are you sure she'll be back on time?"

"There's more than half an hour."

"Well, she better be prompt. I've ordered Dominique's taxi at nine sharp and time is money, y'know. But, of course, tonight I don't care 'cause I'm loaded." Having said this he

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managed to look a little abashed. "I mean, you *have* cashed those checks, haven't you, Billy?"

"I've got twenty in dollars," I said, "and some checks here if we need more."

"Fine, fine," he said beaming. "Nothing like a few Jacksons and Hamiltons to liven things up." A minute later he reverted to his previous agitation fretting and peering out of the window to see if the countess had yet returned. At a quarter before the hour a car drew up in front of the steps and the countess descended.

"Well, thank the sainted G., Billy, you were right. There she is right on the whistle. Might have known she wasn't the sort to stand a fellow up."

At Catbird's urgent behest, we hurried downstairs to the veranda, which was deserted except for Miss Ada Lee. Rosella could not have charted her wardrobe fully, for she was not wearing her black. Instead she had clothed herself in a somewhat embarrassing garment of wrinkled white organdy which her mother might have worn to some long ago cotillion. It wilted where it should have ruffled, and dragged in an unintentional little train in the back, and I almost had it in my heart to be sorry for Miss Ada.

"Why, good evening, boys," she cried. "I must say, I'm all excited at the prospect of our little dancing party. I declare, there's nothing I love like dancing. Why, they just used to call me a regular dancing fool. I declare, it wasn't so long ago that I used to just waltz the night away, night after night."

Catbird gave me a dig in the ribs. "Well, you better oil up

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your wiggle, Ada," he told her, "'cause there won't be any waltzes tonight, just rhumbas and cha-cha-chas. Where's the countess?"

"She just went upstairs to powder her nose. She said she'd be right down in one shake of a lamb's tail."

We sat down to wait and as the church chimes were striking, the countess appeared. She was wearing black chiffon and pearls and looked so incredibly radiant that both Catbird and I were taken aback. My friend soon recovered himself and jumped to his feet almost colliding with her in a surfeit of courtliness.

"Well, well, well, this was worth waiting for, eh, Billy? Why, I'd be willing to bet there isn't a woman black or white in a hundred miles that could hold a candle to you, Countess. You certainly are a sight to warm this old bachelor's heart. Especially with that yard-long tropical moon hanging over the sea."

"You are very kind," said the countess.

Dominique, heeding his instructions, had pulled up in front of the steps.

"Well, yoicks," said Catbird, "off to the fleshpots," and he led the countess down to the car and handed her in. He then scrambled in beside her. Miss Ada, a bit huffily, clambered in after him, while I sat in front with Dominique, and off we rattled to the Trocadero.

Saturday was the big night at the Troc. There was a scratch band which alternated with a skinny young man who played the guitar and whined out Latin-American love songs, and

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Murray had enlisted two lackadaisical Negroes to help serve drinks.

Catbird led us in very grandly and bellowed, "Murray, my usual table, *s'il vous plait*." He then proceeded over to the only empty table, the one at which Christian usually sat. Murray, who had been watching the fat man with an inimical glare from the moment he entered, arrived at the table at the same moment Catbird did.

"You can't sit here," he said. "This is Baron de Monceau's table."

"Nonsense, of course we can. You don't understand I have the Countess of Vaucluse in my party, an old friend of Christian de Monceau's. He wants us to sit here."

"No, no, please," murmured the countess, in some agitation. "I am sure you must be able to find us a table in the back."

"Don't worry, Countess. Any friend of the baron's," said Murray.

"No, really, but I would prefer —"

But Catbird seated her masterfully and she reverted to silence. My friend began the elaborate process of ordering. The countess wanted brandy. She asked Murray for two brands which he did not have. Finally on his recommendation, she settled for Fundador. Miss Ada demanded "a nice Cuba libre with plenty of lime" and Catbird and I took rum on the rocks.

"And make that light on the rocks, garson," added the fat man.

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"Look who's calling who *garçon* all of a sudden," said Murray to no one in particular.

"Well, ha, ha, everybody happy?" said Catbird. "What do you think of this joint, Countess?"

"It is very pleasant, Mr. Stanza."

"Oh, come now, let's cut out all this Mr. Stanza business, Countess. The name's Catbird. Everyone calls me Catbird."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Stanza. I know it is the habit with Americans to call everyone immediately by a nickname, but I cannot accustom myself to it. It seems strange to me, and I fear that I am too advanced in years to change my ways."

"Too advanced in years, Countess? You must be joking. You're a regular chicken."

"I declare. I downright sympathize with the countess," said Miss Ada. "Why, I simply cannot succeed in adjusting myself to these familiar terms of speech people employ nowadays. Why, when I was a girl —"

"Come off it, Ada," said Catbird. "No one's interested in any ancient history."

"Yes," said the countess unexpectedly. "Mr. Axel and I are interested."

"Thank you, Countess," said Miss Ada, "but I'm sure that Mr. Stanza meant it kindly."

A little pause followed. Catbird could obviously think of no fitting rejoinder.

Finally he said, "Well, this isn't exactly the Stork Club, Countess, but I guess we might as well get up and show 'em how to dance."

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"Thank you, Mr. Stanza, but I am not familiar with these South American dances and I am afraid you would regret your choice. Perhaps Miss Lee is more proficient than I."

"No, no," he said pulling her arm till she was forced to get to her feet. "I'll show you a couple of fancy steps that'll knock their eyes out. Anyway, all old Ada does is the waltz."

They moved onto the little space that had been cleared for dancing. A rhumba was playing and the fat man began to writhe in a fashion reminiscent of the burlesque stage. The countess merely stood in one place looking unhappy.

"Let's have a tango, boys," Catbird yelled to the band.

"I just love the tango," said Miss Ada, swaying back and forth where she sat. "Don't you just love the tango, Mr. Axel? I feel it's the most romantic of all the dances belonging to our Latin American neighbors."

"I'm afraid I can't tango," I said.

Neither could Catbird apparently. His idea of the dance seemed to be to get a running start and push the countess into one of the little tables at the side of the floor. After one particularly severe collision, the countess disembarassed herself and moved firmly off in the direction of the powder room.

Catbird rejoined us. "She's gone off to comb her hair. It looked all right to me, but, anyway, I'm just as glad. She dances just like Mrs. O'Leary's cow. Thank God we're not in Chicago." He bellowed at this witticism. Then, turning to me, he said anxiously, "Well, how do you think everything's going?"

I hardly dared say and luckily Miss Ada answered for me.

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"The countess is obviously a person of great refinement, Carleton, and she was offended by your breach of manners to me."

"Who's breached any manners?" said Catbird. "She thought it was funny. Ah, here you are, Countess! We were just wondering what you were doing. Would you care for another snort?" The countess looked puzzled and he pointed to her glass.

"No, thank you, Mr. Stanza. One glass is sufficient," and she turned to Miss Lee.

"Do you find our island interesting, Miss Lee?"

"Oh, yes indeedy, Countess. Why I'm just plain carried away by your lovely island. The beautiful walks and the heavenly weather and the romantic history! Why, I could just stay here forever."

"Unless she butts out, that's just what she'll be doing," said Catbird to me.

"You are interested in history? Perhaps then someday you would like to come with me to the south shore. That is where I grew up. Mr. Bertrand still runs my father's plantation and we might take lunch there and then I could show you the Spanish Rocks and the spot where Columbus is said to have landed."

"Why, I'd just be tickled to death, Countess," said Miss Lee.

"Well, ho, ho, why don't we make it a party?" said Catbird.

"Oh, Mr. Stanza, you have already voiced your distaste for history and I would not dare ask you to join us on such a tir-

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ing expedition. But perhaps Mr. Axel would like to come?"

"Yes, I'd love to," I said feeling a little disloyal.

We made an engagement for the following Thursday, while Catbird sat uncomfortably, shaking the ice in his drink.

Finally he said, "Well, perhaps one day I could show you around the island, Countess. Point out all the picturesque places, you know."

"You are indeed thoughtful, Mr. Stanza, but such a tour would perhaps be more beneficial to one who had not grown up on the island."

"Well," he persisted, "maybe we could go on a little boating expedition. The baron has a launch I'm sure he'd lend me, if he knew what the purpose of the little outing was."

"But what is the purpose, Mr. Stanza?"

"Well, er, hmmm. Well, speak of the devil, look who's just hove to."

We all turned to see Christian de Monceau approaching our table. He looked very elegant in a dark silk suit, but his face was drawn.

"Well, climb aboard, mate," cried Catbird. "Why, I haven't seen you down here for two whole drinking days. You haven't had the bug, have you? I guess you two don't need an introduction. I got it by the grapevine that you're old buddies."

"Yes," said Christian, taking Eliane's hand. "It is so great a pleasure to renew our acquaintance, Eliane. Miss Lee, Billy." He sat down. "As you may have heard, Eliane, contrary to all my noble schemes of so long ago, I have remained on Pinta."

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"Yes, so I had heard, Monsieur de Monceau. I am sure I do not need to tell you with what surprise I heard it."

"Yes, like your father and mine, I have become a planter. And a man of indolence."

"Surely not of indolence, Monsieur de Monceau. For I can hear you shooting every morning, and I am told that you go sailing every afternoon."

"Ah, Madame, you are a stern critic. I can only tell you that the life on Pinta has its compensations. Perhaps I may prove this to you during your stay."

"Perhaps, Monsieur de Monceau, perhaps. But, as you may recall, it is a subject on which I am not calculated to be open-minded. But, after all, what is that to you? Madame Bowers has told me that you have met with the greatest satisfaction and prosperity. You must find living here most rewarding."

"We must all take what rewards life offers. Certainly you have learned that." Christian paused. "I am delighted to see that you have already made friends with our charming visitors. Perhaps, if you were to stay, you could persuade them to remain also."

"Is that what you would wish for us, Monsieur de Monceau? You are very hospitable."

I found myself so uncomfortable during this exchange that I almost asked Miss Ada to dance. However, Christian leaned across the table, interrupting my reluctant opening.

"Ah, Eliane, there is so much I could tell you of the years that have passed between us, so much I have to tell you of my island life . . ."

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"Tell me, yes, tell me," she said, but her voice was more than a shade ironic. She turned to Catbird, passing her hand across her forehead. "I know you will forgive me, Mr. Stanza, if I return home. I find I have a touch of headache, attributable doubtless to a long day in the sun."

Before Catbird could speak, Christian was on his feet. "One dance before you go, Eliane." She moved her hands in a helpless gesture and permitted him to lead her among the forest of tables. As they glided across the floor, Mrs. O'Leary's cow could be mentioned only as the ultimate contrast. The two other couples on the floor retired to watch them and there was a noticeable diminishing in the blare of multilingual conversation.

"I must say, Carleton, that nice countess doesn't seem to have any trouble when she's dancing with a gentleman," said Miss Ada.

"Well, I hope he has steel toe plates. Let me tell you, she's no featherweight when she jumps on your instep."

Catbird ordered another round of drinks for himself and for me. Instead of asking Miss Ada, he said, "Better quit while you're winning, Ada. Don't want any loose tongues wagging around here." Then he asked me, "What do you suppose she's putting off to Christian with? She certainly hasn't been any too full of the breeze before. I'll bet they're fighting about who's supposed to lead."

Indeed the countess and Christian seemed to be in close and animated conversation and I too longed to know what was passing between them. Their antagonistic exchange had

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made me ill at ease and I only hoped that they might be ironing out their mysterious difficulties.

However, at the end of a tango, Eliane disengaged herself, gave a self-conscious smile and threaded her way back to our table. Christian stood watching her, his hand outstretched, but she did not turn her head. When she reached us, Christian turned abruptly and left the Trocadero.

"See, Ada," said Catbird, "he's gone home to soak his feet. Ah, Countess, sit down, sit down. Perhaps another glass of brandy would make you a little peppier."

She shook her head and sat down. "I believe," she said, "that if it will not too much disrupt your party, Mr. Stanza, I will go back to the Crooked Mile. Perhaps the fresh air will cure my head."

Catbird beamed. "That's an A-one idea, Countess. I'll walk you home. They say there's nothing like a little stroll in the moonlight to get your motor racing properly."

"Are you ready, Mr. Axel," said Miss Ada. "I'd just love a moonlight stroll, and I think the countess is right about this place being stuffy. Why, I swear they shouldn't pack so many people in such a little bitty room. Why, we'd all be trampled to a mere nothing if the place caught on fire. And all this smoke makes my eyes smart."

Catbird frowned and made a swift motion under the table, and the countess gave a little cry of pain.

"Have I offended you, Mr. Stanza, that you punish me so cruelly?"

"My green aunt! Deepest regrets, Countess. That kick was

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intended for the Ada. You know, Ada, hearts and flowers, moon over Miami. Get it? Ada and I are old friends, Countess. It didn't mean a thing."

"I can see, Mr. Stanza, that your friendship is not for the perishable," and the countess rose to her feet. "Miss Lee, Mr. Axel, are you coming?"

"No," said Catbird. "They're not coming. Miss Ada is a regular night owl. She'd dance all night. Regular dancing fool, aren't you, Ada?"

"But, Miss Lee, I am sure you would rather come with us," begged the countess.

"No, no, Countess. Thank you kindly, but you know these young men. They're so romantic. And Mr. Axel here just reminded me that I promised him the last waltz." The countess gave me one despairing look as Miss Ada led me triumphantly onto the floor while the band moved into the strains of the cha-cha-cha.

Chapter Seven

ALMOST BEFORE I knew it, I found that the countess and her coterie rather than Catbird's beach had become the center of my life on Pinta. And with this change came a corresponding readjustment in the tone of my life. On the beach I had found oblivion and I had joyfully deeded my body over to its elements — water, earth, and air. In the countess's presence, I became acutely aware of the way I was put together, of the angle of my feet on the carpet, of the joints of my knee under a teacup, and for the first time, I became socially conscious. It was she who made me aware that the island was not really composed of people who, like myself, concerned them-

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selves only with diversion. I grew to realize that a great many of the people whom I had passed on the streets carried on businesses and raised families like most people the world over. The countess, of course, did not bring these people to the Crooked Mile, but she reminded me of their presence when she deserted us to meet with them, and occasionally she introduced me to one couple or another as we walked together over the ways of Pinta. The insight into the machinery of island life to a great degree dissipated the golden haze in which I had existed. I no longer lived without a watch on a floating island, but I became acutely aware that I lived within twenty-four hours on a piece of land which reached down to the ocean bottom, a piece of land with as thick earthen roots as those of my own continent. On the other hand, I derived the magic which sustained me from another source. The countess seemed to me encircled in a glowing aureole, I felt a warmth from passing in her footsteps. I stored each fact that she parted with, each preference she voiced, as pools of sorcery that could nourish me. I woke early now in the morning in anticipation of a day in her sun. Indeed, I think we all fell, each in his own way, a little in love with the countess. When she was with us, we competed for her favors; when she was away, we mourned her absence. Indeed, it seems to me that from the time the countess arrived, we talked of no one and nothing else.

Christian did not reappear to confound Catbird's progress and the fat man continued in his suit which seemed so patently hopeless. He appeared impervious to rebuffs.

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"Aw, these high-class bimbos, Billy. They blow hot, they blow cold," he had said to me after our evening at the Trocadero. "You won't believe it, but after flashing me the green light and the big wink about night air and long walks, why the minute she steps out the door, she hops into Dominique's taxi. Fat lot of opportunity I had to give her a squeeze with that big cannibal watching me all the time in the rear view mirror."

Still at the end of the week, even the fat man seemed in need of a little reassurance. "See here, Billy," he said to me one day at the Troc, "I feel like I've been treading water for a week. I've been pumping away for seven days and where am I? Now, suppose you manage to turn the conversation around to Carleton B. next time you're with her and get Her Grace to say what she really thinks of 'yours truly.' Why, as it is, I don't know whether I'm sunny side up or deep fried."

This was scarcely a mission which appealed to me, as I would have assumed that anyone with the prescribed number of faculties could have observed that the countess did not care at all for my friend, the fat man. She avoided him whenever possible, was silent in his presence whenever practical, and spent the rest of the time snubbing his ponderous advances. In fact, I had often wondered if Catbird's sensibilities could be larded over. "Shy," said Catbird when she fled into the house on his approach. "Coy," he said when she turned down invitation after invitation. "Old-fashioned," he said when she returned in a pile the peculiar jackdaw's treasures he had been doling out to her as tribute. Indeed, I could have asked

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the countess for her opinion of my friend without fearing she would think me intrusive, for all the world could see her opinion of him. Still I preferred not to. I flattered myself that she liked me, even sought me out, and I did not want to embarrass her by asking her to pass judgment on a man she knew to be my friend.

So instead I lied to Catbird. It did not seem to me that it was a large lie, yet I have often wondered how the truth might have changed our lives.

"Oh, I know she likes you, Catbird," I said. "She's just very reserved."

To my distress, Catbird treated my reply as the strongest encouragement.

"Just what I thought. Just what I thought, Billy boy," he cried. "Why, I can just hear that string band playing 'Here comes the bride.' Now all I have to do is pop the question, and we'll all have platinum snaps on our underdrawers. But look here, Billy boy, you'll have to help me."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked reluctantly, rather apprehensive that he might want me to play John Alden to his Myles Standish.

"Well," he said, "you know how the countess is always talking about that little island where they used to have clambakes when she was a kid?"

"Yes," I said. "You mean Little St. Mary's." Even the name had become an incantation to me.

"That's the ticket. Well, what we have to do is organize a picnic out there. You ask Old Rosie and Widdy Kungle and

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the rest of those old pussycats at the Crooked Mile, and we'll take 'em out and give 'em a spread."

"Why don't you do it?" I asked.

"Well, you know the countess. She hates seeing me take any trouble. Why, that's how I tipped to the fact she had a sneaker for me. The way she was always telling me some walk was too long for me or I wouldn't be interested in this or that . . . Why, Billy, you remember how she carried on the time she took you and Ada down to the Spanish Rocks. She said I shouldn't come because I'd be bored. Sweet pips! Can you get a squint of the Ada paying attention to a little item like that? Why, she'd have me running a sightseeing carriage all over Pinta twelve hours a day and pulling it, too, by aces and deuces, if she thought it'd make her a lousy twenty-five cents. Well, anyway, Billy, it's better than even, if the countess thinks I'm going to go to a lot of bother, she'll beg off. So that puts you up at bat, William A."

"All right," I said.

"That's a sport. I'll take a couple of bottles of champagne along, and we'll get a lot of little boats so we can go over two by two, like Noah's ark, and by the time we get there, Queenie and I will be just like pickles and relish and we can have our engagement party right there on the beach."

He stole me a glance. "Look here, Billy. You probably think I belong right in the bin with Rosie and her beads. Great balls of cotton, I don't know whether she'll say yes or no, but you've got to keep rolling, kid. You've got to keep rolling."

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I was not very enthusiastic over his projected outing but I could think of no adequate excuse, so I returned to the Crooked Mile to begin inviting the guests while Catbird went down to the quai to engage the boats. The first people I encountered were Colonel and Mrs. Bagby. When I asked them if they would like to come, the colonel regarded me with astonishment before returning to his book, but Mrs. Bagby beamed. "Oh, I haven't been to a *real* picnic in ever so long. We should love it, and I am told that it is a first-rate beach."

I then went into the house and knocked somewhat timidly on Rosella's door.

"*Entrez, entrez.* Oh, Billy, it's you. What a surprise. I thought you were Marie Louise. How nice you are to call on me. I suppose you have come to tell me that you are in love with Eliane and that you need a shoulder to cry on."

I was a little put out, both by her assumption of my passion and of its summary rejection. "No, but I thought I would have a picnic for the countess tomorrow on Little St. Mary's, and I wondered if you could come."

"A picnic! Entirely out of the question! Absolutely impossible! Wouldn't even consider it. Oh, don't look so hangdog, dear boy. I don't mean for you children, but for me. I haven't stirred out of this house for a year and in any case I'm as sick as a fool in anything that floats. But, I tell you what I shall do. I shall tell Marie Louise to roast some pigeons — of course, you should have grouse for a picnic, but they can't be had here — and chill some *rosé* and make a really nice basket. It would be good for Eliane to have a little outing."

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I then proceeded upstairs to ask the countess. She was having tea and fed me some delicious biscuits. When I told her about the picnic, she said, "Oh, Billy, you are so kind to think of me, and if it would not bore you, I should love to come. I used to go there with my papa and we were so happy."

Miss Ada, Mrs. Kungle, and Miss Floss accepted with enthusiasm, as I had expected. After dinner that night Mrs. Bagby took me aside a bit shyly.

"I suppose," she said, "it would be a terrible imposition to have an old lady come to the picnic all by herself?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Well, you see, poor Harold's arthritis, and all that sea air . . . But I should love to come if I wouldn't be too much in the way."

"I'm awfully sorry the colonel can't come, but of course we'd want you in any case."

There were no more refusals, and all I had left to fear was an inclement day, which, in this blue and gold weather, seemed almost unimaginable.

But the weather was with Catbird. The day was sleek and sunny. All of us, with the exception of the countess, breakfasted together, and we talked merrily, despite Colonel Bagby's occasional pitying glances. After breakfast we separated, agreeing to meet at ten-fifteen, when Dominique's taxi had been ordered to take us to the quai. At the appointed

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hour, we gathered on the porch, where we were joined by the countess with Prince Sam under her arm. She looked enchanting in a soft white dress and shady hat. When the taxi arrived Marie Louise made Dominique go to the kitchen to help her carry out a truly imposing array of hampers, baskets, and Thermos jugs. Though it took them a considerable time to pack these treasures into the car, we continued to talk and laugh. It seemed to me that the picnic was already a success, and I endeavored to forget its ulterior purpose.

When we arrived at the quai, the little boats were dancing on the water, our dark guides were lounging on the dock, and Catbird, a grotesquely picturesque figure in a striped blazer and yachting cap that he had obtained from who knows what source, was striding back and forth consulting his watch.

"Holy day in the morning!" he cried. "I thought we were supposed to push off half an hour ago. The boys were getting jumpy. Had quite a job keeping them calm. Well, Countess, I must say you're a sight worth waiting for, with that big hat and that umbrella. Always a good idea to be prepared, though I must say it doesn't look like rain."

"This is a parasol, not an umbrella, sir," said the countess. "I am afraid that I am subject to burn if I go unprotected in the sun."

"Well, is that a fact? Know just how you feel. That's why I'm wearing the old lid." And he thumped his hat. "Say, Billy, where's the lunch? After all, that's the most important part of the afternoon, eh, Countess?"

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"I have a basket of sandwiches here and Dominique has got the rest."

"Well, that sounds all sevens and elevens. Let's get it packed in and off we go. Well, Countess, what do you say we hop in here?"

"Oh," said the countess. "You will think me forward, Mr. Stanza, but I have already begged our host to escort me over."

Catbird frowned at me. "You must've got it wrong, Countess. Billy here wants to go over with Ada. He told me so last night."

"Miss Lee," said the countess, "will you think me very selfish to deprive you of Billy? I am afraid that Mr. Stanza disapproves of me."

"Disapprove of *you*? Never, Countess. As far as I can see, you're just the cat's pajamas. It's only that —"

But the countess had drawn me down into the first boat with her. Catbird gave me an injured look, for I am afraid that I could not repress my feeling of pleasure. Mrs. Kungle and Mrs. Bagby scrambled down into the second boat and Miss Ada seated herself in the third.

"Well, Ada," said Catbird, with an attempt at his old joviality, "it looks like the cheese goes alone. Shall we, Miss Floss?" And he offered her his arm. But Miss Floss, an oversized figure in quaintly patched blue jeans, had flung herself down into Miss Ada's boat.

"*Land* a mercy!" cried Miss Ada as the boat rocked dangerously, but it resumed an even keel and the fat man was forced to sit in solitary and unwilling splendor in the fourth boat.

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The boys started the motors and off we spun across the water tops. More precisely, three motors started, for a single motor sputtered and the sound of the fat man's profanity floated out across the spread of ocean. We circled, waiting, until we saw his boat strike out from the quai. Then we pointed once more toward the open sea. The countess sat in the bow of the boat with her back to the spray. She leaned back on her cushions and smiled happily, cradling her little dog in her arms.

"See, Billy, see how he loves an ocean voyage. He feels that, like Britannia, he rules the waves."

I could not see that the little animal showed any particular enthusiasm, but alternatively, he did not seem to be afraid.

"Now, you must tell me the truth, Billy. Do you like our funny little island?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "I don't suppose I have ever liked any place so much."

"Oh, is that true? I am so pleased."

"But I thought you didn't care for it much," I said. "I thought you just came back for business."

"Ah, I must be honest with you. I, too, thought I had come back only for business. My friend, Rosella, has been writing me ever since the death of my husband that I should return. But I could not bring myself to do it. Well, at last my affairs here came to an embroilment and one must do what one must . . . So here I am. But, oh, Billy, you are not yet of an age when it is strange to return to the scenes of your childhood. For, you see, each time I round a corner, there is such a flood

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of memories that I don't know whether to laugh or cry or stand still or run away. But there comes a time when even sad memories are sweet. And, of course, it is more than just places I remember. There are people. And that is doubly strange, for some of the old people of my dreams have new faces, some of them, indeed, have grown faces that I would not know. And it is so odd to be living again in the house with Rosella."

"Did you live with Madame Bowers before?" I asked a little disingenuously.

"Well, it was only for a few months just before I left for the convent. I was hardly more than a little girl then."

"I see," I said. "I used to wonder about how you and Madame Bowers got to be such friends."

"Oh," she said, "do you not know that story? Well, of course, to begin with, she became a friend of my mama's. You must know, Billy, that after Papa died, my poor mama went into a decline." She paused for a moment. "I know," she said, "that nowadays people do not go into declines. They do not die of broken hearts. The doctors say that it cannot be so. But my mama was too old-fashioned to know this. She moved away into a bedroom at the end of the house, and she ate scarcely at all and saw almost nobody. And before I knew it, her hair was quite gray, and she had become indeed an old lady, who sat with her hands very still on the counterpane and never smiled or talked. One day, when I was playing in front of the house, a carriage drove up — for carriages were still used, though there were many cars on the island by then.

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When the driver opened the door, I thought at first the queen must be visiting us, for I had never before seen such furs and such pearls. The lady called to me in English and asked me who I was, and I was so amazed that I could scarcely speak. Then she told me that she had come to see my mama. I told her that Mama never saw anyone, not even the governor, any more.

"And she said, 'Well, I know she will want to see me. I am Mrs. Bowers of Park Lane, and I have letters from the Bishop of Arles and the Marquise de la Mer Blanche.' I was quite terrified of her, with her red hair and her long names, and I ran into the house, into Mama's room. Almost before I could tell her what had happened, Madame Bowers was in the room with us. And she sat down on the foot of the chaise longue and started to talk to Mama, who lay there in her nightgown looking oh so surprised. I cannot remember how long she talked or even what she said, but perhaps it was not for children's ears for suddenly Mama made a gesture to me and said, 'Child, child, run tell Otilie to bring us some sherry.' And later, when I sat in the hall waiting, half afraid of what this strange woman might do to my mama, I heard a noise — oh, such a noise! It was like the creaking of an old untuned harp, and do you know what it was? It was the sound of my mama's laughter. And Billy, she had not laughed for years. I would love Rosella for that laugh alone, if for nothing else. But after that, Rosella came out every day. Every day she sat with my mama and amused her with her drolleries and her gossip, for she gossiped of everything, of her life, and the life Mama had

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left in France, and perhaps even of things that neither she nor Mama could ever have known. And, finally, you know, she moved in with us before I was to go away. It was she, not I, who was with Mama when she died. For I was three thousand miles away then in France. The war had come and I could not go home."

"Oh," I said, "I didn't know how good she had been to your mother. Of course, she told me long ago that you and she were such old friends, but I never know when to believe her."

"Oh, come now, Billy, she is eccentric, I agree, but certainly not untruthful."

"Well, for instance, she's always telling wild stories about those pearls. I'm not even sure they're real," and I waited anxiously to hear what the countess would say.

"Dear me, you are a cynic. But of course they are real, if that matters. And perhaps some of her stories may be fabricated, Billy, but you must understand that she is very romantic."

"Well, then, I am afraid that I am too old to believe in romance," I said, looking, I believed, even more cynical.

The countess smiled, "Ah, Billy, you mean you are too young to believe. At your age, if you will forgive me, the world is as it is, and that's that. Now I have lived perhaps twice as long as you have, and certainly I am twice as romantic; and once again, Rosella, who has lived perhaps twice as long as I, is twice as romantic as I. When I was a child, I was never surprised, but now I know miracles for what they are. You see, I have lived now a whole romance. Of course, it was

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not a romance at the time. It was no more unlikely than the sun in the sky or the bloom on the rose. I was fifteen, you know, when I went to the convent, and in my first spring, Sister Bernadette was taking us for a trip to the Orangerie, when I passed in the street a man of the most extraordinary beauty and grace. He was tall and his hair was golden like a god's and he moved like a king. I stopped and looked after him, and at the same time he turned and looked at me, and there we stood like people who had lost their wits, till the sister chided me and we went on our way. But I could not forget his face, and I told myself again and again that he was my fate.

"Then, of course, the war came and I left Paris and went to stay with the old Marquise de Gondefleur, my mama's god-mother. One day she took me to call on the Duchesse de Long-tours, who had the next estate, and the old duchesse talked with great animation of her son, who was a hero in the resistance. She must have been in an agony, la duchesse, for she had not heard from him for so long. But she said it was nothing, that he would turn up out of the air without warning as he always did and then vanish again for months. Suddenly, I do not know why, my hands went very cold, and I asked the duchesse if she had a photograph of her son. 'Of course,' she said, and she showed me one on the table. They both laughed at my face. I must have looked completely in the moon, for of course, it was the face of my young man. 'Ah,' said the marquise, 'you are not the first, my love. They call Maxim "Apollo."' I used to dream after that that he would see me in

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Tante Anne's garden and recognize me at once, and that he would come and speak to me and we would walk down the allée to the canal. One evening — it was the sixth of March — Tante Anne and I dined with the duchesse. After dinner, we were drinking our coffee in the drawing room when the door simply opened and there was Maxim. He was wearing a rain-coat and his golden hair was wet with the rain.

"His mother ran to him and kissed him and then he looked at me and said, '*La belle Hélène*.' I thought that he must know my name, but it was '*Hélène*' that he said. Do you know that he had remembered me all that time, and that he had always thought of me by that name, from a poem he had loved as a child."

She paused. "I was so unhappy when finally Tante Anne said that we must go home. I lay awake all night and when the sun came in my window, I rose to get dressed. But, do you know, that when I went to my window, I saw Maxim standing below in the garden . . . It was as I imagined it so many times to myself. I dressed in a minute and flew downstairs, but he had vanished like a figure in a dream and, like a child, I cried to dream again. When I told Tante Anne, she said that what he had done was very dangerous, that he might have been betrayed, and then, of course, I cried more than ever. In a few days, I got a letter from him and that was sweet, but of course, I could not answer it, and that was terrible agony. I saw him again three times with his mother and then — well — and then, when the war was over, he returned . . . and soon we were married."

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"Well, that is very romantic," I said, "but, of course, it doesn't happen to everyone."

"Ah, but it does, Billy, it does, but we can only know it in retrospect. While we are quick to our actions, there is no romance. It lives only in memories — and perhaps in dreams."

I said nothing.

"But you, Billy, your romance is yet before you."

"Maybe," I said.

"Oh, assuredly."

"Maybe there are people who never have a real romance."

"There are, perhaps, but you are certainly not one of them. Why, look at the way you are living now, far away from your home and your parents, writing . . ."

"My parents are dead," I said. It was unnecessary and I said it on impulse to discomfit her, a little wounded by her emphasis on my youth and her assumption that experience lay only before me.

"Oh, Billy, how could I be so thoughtless. You must forgive me, but you look so young . . ."

"I'm twenty-four," I said boldly.

She said nothing, but gave me a sweet grave look.

"Oh, all right," I said, "I'm eighteen."

"Very well," she said, "and I am thirty-four. Now we have both violated the code, for a gentleman never lies about his age and a lady never, never tells the truth about hers."

We laughed together, and I suddenly felt that my age was irrelevant.

As we neared the beach, we could see that the ladies had

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already landed. They were standing in an uncomfortable little cluster, like people who arrive at a party after all the chairs have been occupied. Catbird's boat was close behind us and indeed for the last quarter mile we had clearly heard the fat man instructing his boatman in the strongest terms imaginable to catch up with us. I did not doubt that he had put the worst construction on the fact that ours was the laggard boat. As our boatman drew us up on the sand, Catbird leaped from his craft and waded over to us. "Here, Countess," he cried, "guess what you need is a good strong right arm."

Simultaneously he seized the basket with the sandwiches and pulled the countess, still holding Prince Sam, to her feet. Almost immediately, there was a quadruple scream from the beach as the fat man tumbled back into the water, carrying as unwilling hostages the countess, the hamper, and the dog. The countess managed, with extreme skill, to hold Prince Sam above her as she fell and he alone escaped, reigning with seeming nonchalance above the floods.

The countess was thoroughly soaked, however, and her pretty hat floated out to sea. The fat man lumbered to his feet, fished out the streaming hamper, and then offered the countess his other hand.

"Mr. Stanza, I pray you do not abandon the sandwiches."

"Right you are, Countess, but I've got another paw ready to help a lady in distress."

"Perhaps Billy is less occupied," she replied, as the boatman and I lifted her dripping from the water.

Catbird waded unhappily behind us. "I'm certainly sorry

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you slipped, Countess. I'm afraid these goodies here are a dead loss. And I guess that sun shade is not much better off."

"No," she said. "I believe, Mr. Stanza, that not even an umbrella could have withstood the deluge you inflicted upon us."

At the water's edge, the countess removed her sandals and was then escorted up to a large beach towel amidst the clucking solicitude of the previous arrivals.

"Please," said the countess, "do not alarm yourselves. There has been no real harm done. I was only afraid for my darling little Sam, but see how brave he is!"

Indeed it seemed to me that the little dog displayed no nobler emotion than greed, for he was sniffing the lunch boxes feverishly and flailing his worm of a tail about. I decided that even for the countess's sake he could not have my pigeon.

The countess had unwrapped her coronet of hair, which fell down her back in waves and now she was combing it out in the sun. Catbird had removed his jacket, for he was as wet as she, and in his dank condition looked even less appetizing than usual. I kicked off my shoes and rolled up my trousers, and soon was fairly comfortable.

I could hear Miss Ada and Miss Floss, who seemed to have reached a sort of guarded alliance, gabbling behind us.

"I declare," said Miss Ada, "I do believe her face is real after all. I was under the impression that all French ladies indulged themselves in at least one solid inch of cosmetic aids."

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I was about to turn and reappraise Miss Ada's mauve powder when the countess touched my hand.

"Billy," she said, "perhaps you would walk with me to the top of the cliff. I have not been that way for so very long and you know you can see Ma Folie quite clearly from there."

We walked up a little path along the precipice, which the countess must have remembered from her childhood, and continued halfway around the island. Suddenly she stopped and clutched my arm. "Look, there it is! Can you see it, at the foot of the bay?" Indeed, the old house was plainly visible among the palm trees.

"How lovely it is," I said with sincerity.

"Do you know with what I associate this little island?" the countess asked. "You will laugh, but I associate it with Christmas. Each Christmas morning I would look out my bedroom window and know that my papa would bring me here in the afternoon."

"Really," I said. "Christmas was always snowstorms and stockings and all those kinds of trite things for us."

"Well, of course, we had oranges and presents, but there are no evergreens on the island. It was not till I went to France that I ever saw a real Christmas tree. But after Christmas dinner, Papa would take me down to his boat and over we would come. Then we would sit on this cliff and make plans for the new year. How I wish you could have known my papa. He was the handsomest man I ever knew. I think perhaps when he rode his white horse, he looked a little like your George Washington — and he was oh so clever! He knew nine lan-

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guages, he could ride like an Arab, and he was the finest shot in the world."

"Yes, of course, I remember — he used to do target practice like Christian, every day."

"That is true. He did. I cannot say how startled I was the first day I returned to hear those shots. It was like seeing a ghost."

"Was your father much like Christian?"

"Oh, dear me, no." She laughed, then hesitated. "Well, perhaps they might seem alike to you. Of course, my papa chose to spend his life here. He, too, looked after his plantation and followed his sports, but no, they are not a bit alike."

We stood in silence for a while, watching her old house. The windows were lit by the sun and the house looked as though it were on fire.

"I have not been here," she said at last, "since the Christmas before Papa died. He died of cancer, you know."

"How awful."

"It is not a pleasant death. He held me in his arms and told me not to cry, that it was the will of God. He was a very religious man, you see. Those were his last words."

"The will of God," she repeated bitterly, her dark eyes flashing. "It was the arrogance of man. He came to this island, he abandoned the world and all that he was fitted for, he thought he could build out of this land his own heaven and earth. And for what?"

She clasped her hands. "Oh, Billy," she said, "I am a real French woman and I loathe, I abominate, waste. And it was

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waste, nothing but waste. He was a man of such great talents and he squandered them all. All that they wrote on his tombstone was, 'He was beloved.' And do you know what he died of? It was cancer of the stomach. They cut it out of people in the hospitals every day. I was young then, but I was not too young to ask the doctor if he needed to die. 'If he had been in France,' I said, 'if he had had adequate medical care, would he have died?' Of course, the doctor would not say, but I read books and I studied on it and I asked another doctor and this time I learned the truth. He would not have died."

Her eyes were frilled now with tears that did not spill. She turned to me suddenly. "I don't know why I am burdening you with all this, Billy. I thought that I had quite buried my dead, but it is strange to me to be again on this place where we would plan so gaily for the new year. You have been very sympathetic, Billy. I suppose that you are used to confidences."

"I suppose it's because I have no life of my own," I said.

"Don't say that, Billy, please. I believe, perhaps, it is because you are a writer. There must be some special presence in writers that draws people to confide in them. After all, that is how writers get their material, isn't it?" She gave a little laugh that was half a sob. I seized her hand and we stood that way for perhaps a minute. I could scarcely breathe.

But my sweet indecision was broken by the unwelcome puffing of the fat man. He was twenty feet below us and damp with exertion. "Hi, there, Billy," he called. "You two must climb like a couple of billy goats. I've been chasing after you

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for hours. The Ada needs you." He panted to a stop. "It's something about the lunch. Better trot on down."

I knew this was Catbird's signal, but I was very loath to leave him the field.

"Surely Miss Lee can wait until we all return," said the countess, who was by now fully composed.

"No, no. She's all up in the air. Has to see Billy this very minute. You know how these old ducks are."

I made no adieu, but feeling both cowardly and a bit relieved, I went off down the cliffs.

When I reached the beach, the ladies had the lunch already spread out, and showed, as I had anticipated, no need of aid. At a considerable distance, the boat boys were dividing their box. Mrs. Kungle handed me a hard-boiled egg as I sat down. "I hope the countess and Mr. Stanza won't mind us just starting ahead, but the lunch just looked so tasty, we just couldn't resist it," she said with a pointless giggle.

Miss Floss resumed the conversation which I had interrupted. She was explaining existentialism to her friends. Mrs. Bagby interjected that Harold had explained it rather differently to her, but Miss Floss overrode her gentle voice with her aggressive singsong. She seemed to take great pleasure in Miss Ada's and Mrs. Kungle's horror at the ideas she propounded, and soon all four ladies grieved for the plight of present-day youth. My attention wandered. I noticed a trim white sailboat tacking towards us. It must be Christian, I thought. Could he be coming here? I had not mentioned our expedition to him and it seemed very likely that he knew nothing of it. I

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watched idly as the sails moved back and forth across the horizon.

Miss Ada interrupted my reverie. "Why, Carleton," she cried, "what is the matter?"

"What have you done with the countess?" said Miss Floss accusingly.

"I pushed her down a precipice," said the fat man. He looked disheveled and decidedly put out. He picked a pigeon from the basket and came over to sit by me. He munched loudly but did not seem in the mood to volunteer any information. I am afraid that I was atingle with curiosity, and after a decent interval, I asked cruelly, "Well, what happened?"

Catbird turned his thumb down and made a motion of negation before returning to his pigeon. At length, when he had left only the slimmest possible carcass, he flung it from him. "All French women are Lesbians," he said. A moment later, he began to laugh. "Well, Billy, it looks like the Ada and I are here for the duration. It looks like I'll have to get hitched to old Rosie and Ada can shack up with Dominique." This idea struck him as immensely comic.

"You know, Billy," he said when his shaking subsided, "I'm no Tyrone Power, but do you think she had to say she'd jump off the cliff if I touched her?" I had no reply to this and we both sat in silence, looking out to sea.

It was perhaps another ten minutes before the countess returned. With her bedraggled dress, her bare feet, and her long gleaming hair in disarray, she looked like a little poor girl in

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some elaborate ballet, or a lost and ragged princess in a fairy tale.

"Oh, there you are, Countess," called Mrs. Kungle. "You better come on over before all we greedy bears gobble everything up."

The countess merely shook her head blindly and gazed in a dazed fashion around the beach.

"Where is Prince Sam?" she said finally.

The fat man suggested he must be off chasing some dormouse, but no one really seemed to know.

Then the countess began to look about the sand, and as she searched, she repeated over and over again, "Where is Prince Sam? Where is Prince Sam?"

Her voice grew more and more shrill. We looked everywhere and our search was complicated by Catbird's good intentions. He poked about with a sandwich in each hand peering under driftwood, but every time his path would converge with that of the countess, she would shudder and cry, "Don't come near me." This made us all uncomfortable, and even the staid Mrs. Bagby grew a little hysterical. Finally, the countess sat down on a log and covered her face.

"He is drowned," she said. "Oh, don't look for him. There is nothing you can do. He is drowned and I will never see him again. Never, never!"

The fat man began to trail rather foolishly along the shore craning into pools, but Miss Ada hovered behind the countess, an avid expression on her face.

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"Why, don't despair, Countess," she said. "You lost him once before, didn't you, and he turned up right as rain."

"No, no," said the countess. "That was my little Robespierre. Often he wandered. But Prince Sam has never been away from me for so much as an hour. He would not know what to do," and she began to sob.

"Oh, just you wait a little while, Countess. He'll turn up, too. 'Cause you must have thought he was gone for good, when you gave that kind woman the sable coat and the farm for bringing him back. Now, didn't you?"

"Oh, I forget. Yes, I suppose so," said the countess in a tired voice. "And how could he turn up here? He tried to follow me and he fell into the water." She dried her eyes and stood up, staring out to sea. Her eyes must have caught the sails of Christian's little boat. It was closer now and we could even see Christian leaning against the windward side. Her face changed, she clasped her hands to her breast and said with a kind of sigh, "*Dieu merci. C'est lui!*" Then she ran straight out into the waves.

"Christian! Christian! Christian!" she shrieked. Her voice carried far out over the green water and Christian looked up in surprise. Then he tacked his boat and brought it luffing in towards us. He had barely time to beach his boat before the countess was upon him. She grasped his hand and began to cry uncontrollably.

"*Dieu merci, tu es venu,*" she managed finally. Christian turned helplessly to me.

"But what has happened?" he said.

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Eliane began to tell him indistinguishably about her hat, the sandwiches, the cliff, that man, Prince Sam.

"Prince Sam is lost," I said.

"The dog?"

I nodded.

"Well, let us see," said Christian. He seated Eliane gently on the beach and began to skirt the sands, whistling. Suddenly he upturned one of the picnic baskets and rolled out the indignant Chihuahua.

"Voilà," he said, smiling. "Here he is." He carried the surfeited dog over to the countess, who grasped him to her heart.

"I am delighted that your dog has reappeared, Madame. I can only hope that after this distressing interlude, the rest of the afternoon will be most successful," and Christian kissed her limp hand and started back to his boat, which lay like a large dead bird upon the sand.

But the countess sprang to her feet. "*Non, non, je t'en supplie, Christian. Ne me laissez pas seule ici.*"

He had pushed his boat into the water and now he paused, his eyebrows raised. She ran out after him, and, wordlessly, he lifted her onto the seat of the boat. For a moment, they made a strange picture, Christian impeccable as always in a silk shirt with a scarf at his throat and immaculate linen trousers, and the countess in her fantastic dishevelment, clinging to him with wild eyes. Then the wind caught the sails. Christian sprang in, and the boat skated over the waves out to sea.

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We were left with her shoes and her parasol. There was a silence among us as we stood on the shore. Finally, the fat man turned back to the picnic basket.

“Well,” he said. “If no one else wants the extra pigeon . . .”

Chapter Eight

THE PICNIC, after the countess's departure, could hardly have been termed a success, but then, neither was it a failure in the sense that most unsuccessful parties are failures — rather it had the lopsided movement of a mechanism that has lost a gear. We were all affected — Mrs. Bagby was a bit abashed, and while Mrs. Kungle and Miss Floss strove to retain their equanimity by playing word games, only Miss Ada, who rationed a curious secretive smile over the rest of the afternoon, seemed to find something satisfying in the situation. As for the fat man, he had lost his volubility, but not

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his appetite, and he spent the time stuffing himself beyond any ordinary human capacity.

He and I returned together at the end of the afternoon, and as we thudded across the waves, his good humor seemed to rekindle, and he began to regale me with long and somewhat obscene stories from his past. Once we had landed, he offered to buy me a drink at the Troc, but I declined. I felt drugged by the events of the day, and when dinner was over, I went directly to bed.

That night I dreamed that Catbird and I were being pulled relentlessly out to sea by a strange current. We were in a boat without a sail, and without oars, yet I could not bring home to the fat man the gravity of our predicament, and he continued to shake with mechanical laughter. On the shore, the countess spun round and round on a tremendous red and yellow carousel that blared out a tune I knew but could not name. Above the raucous music, I could hear her calling with sweet urgency, "Billy, Billy, Billy!" I could not tell whether she was frightened for me or for herself. And the current quickened.

The sea used to figure regularly in my nightmares. I would wake time and again, damp with sweat, to find my body had been rolled under dream waves, but my nights on Pinta had hitherto been free of these phantom perils.

My first thought on awaking was to look at my watch — one of those waterproof, shockproof mechanisms with an illuminated dial — for I had a horror of being awake in the empty hours of the morning. It shone implacably into min-

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utes — twenty past two. This was dismal news indeed, and I was trying to compose my mind to sleep again when I heard a small voice calling, "Billy, Billy!"

Without stopping to think who it could be, I pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms and opened the door. My eyes had been only poorly conditioned to the idea of light by the radium figures on my dial, and the full glare of the corridor lamps made me blink and retreat like a winter sleeper. When I adjusted myself to the brightness, I became aware of the countess.

She was standing beyond the threshold in an enormous sweater, with her hair pinned rather neatly onto the top of her head in the sublimation of a washerwoman's knot and she looked now a trifle nonplused.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Billy," she said. "I did not imagine that you were asleep. Is it so late?"

"No, not really," I said. "I don't usually get to bed so early."

"Well, but I don't know what to say. I came to ask you to forgive me, and now as it happens, I must beg your forgiveness for coming at all."

"Forgive you for what?" I said rather stupidly.

"For leaving your picnic so abruptly and for crying so ungovernably and for behaving in every way like a termagant. In short, for being everything that is objectionable. It goes without saying that I am penitent, but, oh Billy, indeed I am *very* penitent, and I felt I could not let the night pass without telling you so."

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"Oh, that's all right, Countess," I said. "You didn't do anything, *really*."

"Ah, but I did, I *did*. I insulted the whole party by my behavior, and in particular, my host, of whom I am so fond, and I must beg you to forgive me, Billy. You must see that I am a very silly woman. I have just completed my role of the ill-mannered guest who, after disrupting the party, returns at a most unwelcome hour to apologize. But, Billy, do forgive me, and believe that I am not always so foolish, and I will go away very meekly."

"Of course I do, Countess. There's nothing to be sorry for. I'm afraid it was a pretty ghastly picnic."

"Oh, no, Billy. It was a lovely picnic, a lovely picnic. And Billy, you must please call me Eliane, for we are good friends. Indeed, I *hope* we are good friends."

At this moment, the door across the corridor opened and Miss Ada's long stalk of a neck protruded. Her head, curved around the edge of the door, looked oddly decapitated, but she managed by this contortionist's pose to avoid any indiscreet display of her night garments.

"Good gracious," she cried, "I do beg pardon for the intrusion." She continued to gape at my dishabille and, if indeed she felt she had intruded, she did nothing to remedy the situation.

The countess turned and gave her a sweet smile.

"Good evening, Miss Lee. I was just saying good night to Billy."

"Oh," said Miss Ada, and managed an uncommitted giggle.

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"Well, Countess, I just heard a noise, and I thought to myself, I declare, I wouldn't be surprised if this whole hotel isn't one mass of flames and here am I up in my little garret room, a million miles from aid. You know, I have a deathly fear of night conflagrations, and I know darn well that Mary Lou wouldn't so much as throw a glass of water on me if I were on fire, much less call up and tell me to evacuate."

"Miss Lee, I am so distressed that I awakened you. Truly, I have made every conceivable blunder this evening."

Miss Ada looked with extreme interest from the countess to me and back again.

"Well," she sighed, reluctantly, "as long as I have discovered that I have been saved for yet another night in this world of woe, I daresay I'd best be popping back to bed."

"Good night," I said, I hoped with finality.

Her door swung to, but a moment later I could see it trembling, swinging gently back and forth like the breathing apparatus of an oyster.

"Alas," said the countess, "to complete the debacle I have only to rouse poor Rosella and that good Mrs. Kungle. We must be very quiet now, Billy."

And she put a finger to her lips. Then she took my hand, pressed it, and said, "Good night, my friend, good night." She tiptoed off down the corridor and I was left to return to my bed and my night thoughts.

But the countess's extraordinary behavior possessed my mind to such a degree that I did not feel inclined to go to sleep. Finally, I found a cigarette and leaned by the window,

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smoking and listening to the little noises of the night. While I blew smoke into the dark air, I tried to recollect our interview. I wondered to what the countess's exhilaration could be attributed, for behind her stream of apologies, she had seemed emotionally tipsy. I could not help but be vain enough to wonder if perhaps she had not fallen in love with me.

This was a shockingly bold idea, but when I thought back to the scene on the cliff when it would have seemed right to take her in my arms, and again to her mysterious middle-of-the-night visitation, it did not seem altogether unfeasible. I knew, or rather I had read, that older women often took fancies to young men, and that the apparent innocence of youth was entrancing to the experienced. My heart began to beat very hard at this thought, but I did not know whether I was more triumphant or terrified to think that the countess might descend to my plane. The idea was altogether overwhelming. I felt that I could scarcely marshal myself to withstand another flesh and blood encounter. In fact, I did not know how to confront a tangible passion, and the thought of a relationship that I must contend with through my emotions, rather than relish in abstraction, was almost repellent to me.

The figure of the countess seemed to bloat in my mind, and, as if distorted by a grotesque mirror, a dozen little things she had said and done that had charmed my reveries appeared now unfitting and ludicrous. Above all, it seemed to me incongruous that a woman past thirty should choose for a lover a boy of eighteen, a boy of whom she knew nothing, not

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even his name. And I thought it not only indiscreet, but ridiculous that the countess should trust so completely in a mask and expose her vulnerability to a shadow. "She has wronged me," I thought bitterly. "She has wronged me." I had seen her as the princess in the golden tower, but now she must come down from the tower, and on the ground she seemed very like a foolish dowager. I looked about me and it seemed to me then that the whole island was ugly and the night a welcome cover for its deformity. The trees twisted like giant plants, and the ground was rough and pitted with shadows like the wastes of the moon. I looked from the stagnant harbor up the hunched steepes of hills towards Christian's plantation and I said aloud, "I must leave this place."

But the noise of my own voice and the thought of Christian dispelled my shady thoughts. With a sudden clarity, I saw to an unconsidered truth. The countess had left us early in the afternoon and it was now early in the morning. Undoubtedly, the intervening hours must have transmuted her tears into exhilaration and the intervening hours must have been Christian's, and, significantly, she had been bewildered by the time, although before this she had always appeared a woman with a chronometer built into her sensibilities. So it was Christian's triumph, perhaps! I believe that I blushed in the dark. Indeed, I felt that I had been almost publicly reprimanded for my delusions. As I abased myself, the countess soared triumphantly in my mind till she appeared far above me, cloud encircled, like the Madonna in Assumption. With the renewal of distance between us, I felt an unrea-

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sonable resumption of my old longing. Her years seemed to dissolve, her beauty flamed again, and she appeared radiant, seductive, eternally desirable. I bitterly begrudged Christian his hours and I deplored the time I had dissipated. I threw my cigarette out the window and went back to bed. A moment later, to my surprise, I found that tears were coursing down my cheeks, for I do not know what reasons — anger? sorrow? frustration? — perhaps because, indeed, I did not know what I felt . . .

It rapidly became apparent that my second supposition was the correct one. We at the Crooked Mile scarcely saw more than the flick of a skirt and Prince Sam's tail in the days that followed, for the countess seemed to spend her entire time with Christian. She was always hurrying down to his roadster or running inside to change her clothes to be ready to go off with him again. And when we did see her, she was not the woman we had known. Her grave expression had vanished along with her matronly pose; her eyes danced now. She often skipped instead of walked, her old reserve had dissipated, and she had a kind, if fleeting, word for everyone. In fact, in lieu of treating us all like her children, as she had done before, she came to treat us as if we were benevolent grandparents.

Her happiness was contagious and I found it impossible to be jealous of Christian. My only demand on him

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was a little of her time, and this, though I obtained it through false pretenses, I felt he could scarcely begrudge me. I had asked the countess to pose for a portrait. I had told her in a burst of bravado that I had sold several portraits in the States, and she had been most flattering in regard to my versatility and begged to see some of my work. Vaingloriously, I suggested the portrait, and as a consequence she now posed for me perhaps half an hour of every third morning. I took pains to make it clear that no one should see the picture until it was entirely completed, although certainly I had no idea how this consummation was to be reached. I sketched only in the most amateurish fashion, yet at the end of a week and after many false starts, I did have what I thought represented a likeness of sorts, and I felt encouraged to believe that in another week or so I might actually turn out a product.

But the picture, of course, was only an excuse for the precious half-hour which I had the right to spend utterly alone with Eliane. She could sit wonderfully still, and in fact deserved a more professional pencil than mine. She would hold herself with easy dignity, her expression serene, her hands motionless, for at least twenty-five minutes of my allotted time; though at the very end, her desire to meet Christian obviously overcame her feeling of duty to me, and she fluffed her hair and laughed and chattered. But this time was very dear to me and I hoarded it jealously, and because of it, the sketch, as a talisman of time spent in happiness.

One morning I had taken my sketch down to the beach to

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ponder and rework it when Catbird came upon me by surprise. Since the countess's desertion, we had begun to spend our time together in the old carefree fashion, but I had hitherto guarded my sketch from him as jealously as from the rest. Now, however, he was literally peering over my shoulder, and it was too late to conceal it.

"Say," he said, "I never knew you were in the picture game, Billy boy."

"Oh, it's just a sketch for a portrait," I said, I hoped, casually.

Catbird examined it more closely. "Well, Jerusalem the Golden! If that isn't a slam-bang job! Put a fly on her nose and I'd swear it was the Ada."

I stiffened. "It's supposed to be the countess."

Catbird came and flopped down beside me and studied it more carefully. Finally he burst into short, sharp explosions of laughter.

"Billy boy, you're a case," he said. "I'll walk from here to the Spanish Rocks with ten green pickles on my nose if you only promise you'll show it to her sometime when I can see her face."

I was deeply hurt. Unlike Catbird, I could not see the humor in the situation, and I said loftily, "Look here, Catbird, this is an expressionistic portrait. It isn't meant to look exactly like her. Anyone can do that."

"Oh," said he, "I thought that was the trick. Well, in that case, I take back the green pickles and offer you my hand, my lad, because it certainly doesn't look a thing like her."

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I maintained an injured silence.

"Of course," he continued, "what I know about art you could put in old Rosie's eye, and as you know, the countess gave me the quick and dirty, but still and all I've got to grant that the girl's a looker and I wouldn't call it more than two to seven that that would please her."

As I continued to sulk, he told me, "Don't look so empty-pockets, now, Billy. Maybe you can sell it to Christian for a hot boodle. Call it 'The Countess in Drag' or 'The Countess Eating a Green Persimmon.' No, better yet, call it 'The Countess Looking at Carleton B. Stanza,'" and he howled with glee. I did not join him.

"Well, what do you think of *that* vacation romance? It seems like the countess isn't the cold fish I thought she was, though I guess that's yesterday's news to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, look here, Billy, I don't want to poke a snout where I shouldn't stick a toe, but you must know that the Ada could stand in any day for the town crier. She told me last blue moon that she caught Queenie playing footie with you in your B.V.D.'s. Still, that's all to the south now that she and the baron are burning up the beaches. Why, poor old Christian is too exhausted to even drag himself down to the Troc any more. Murray keeps gazing out the door like a sea captain's widow. Guess the tips must be falling off."

"Well," I said, "Christian and Eliane are old friends."

"Old friends, my granny's potty! They weren't such old friends a couple of weeks ago. That night you and me and

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General Lee were on the town with her she stuck him right in the deep freeze. That's one reason I figured I might get a chance to pinch her bustle. I tell you, Billy, your Uncle Catbird can tell you a lot of things, but when it comes to the doxies, I guess I get the old dunce cap. First they give you the wink, and then they squeal when you give 'em a squeeze, and to really queer the game, they've been snapping their garters in some other guy's face the whole time."

I was rather appalled to think that the countess seemed to have moved Catbird's heart no more than one of Madame La Farge's employees.

"Tell you what's going to happen to poor old Christian," he continued. "Just when it looks like something's going to give, she'll say, 'No, no, I am betrothed to Prince Sam,' and I'm not joking. There's a word for that kind of thing, but I forget what it is. Hell's splinters! I used to think it was more of Rosie's Yankee Doodle slish-slosh about that other dog, but I'm beginning to think it was the Gospel by St. Luke. The Ada swears it's so and she can't get her mind off that sable. I must say, if old Ada had a sable coat, she'd wear it right in the tub with her, and Christian'd probably shoot her in the backside thinking she was a walrus. Still and all, I go along with our delegate from Virginia on one thing. The countess'd roll us all to hell on a hoop for the sake of that squeaky little splinter."

"Maybe that's how Rosella got her pearls," I suggested. "She found Robespierre and the countess made her a present of them."

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"Yeah?" said Catbird laughing. "Then all I can say is she's a hell of a cheapskate. I'd leave more for a fifty-cent taxi ride. Shall we play some gin?"

We retired to our shelter and he trounced me again at our game. Gradually, despite my colossal losses, I began to laugh with him; but still the hurt and shame I felt for my artistic fiasco stained my thoughts and I did not feel that I could ever again face the idea of sketching the countess.

That same afternoon, something happened which saved me the embarrassment of angling myself out of my Sunday morning commitment to the countess. I was reading on the veranda when Marie Louise approached me bearing a silver salver. She murmured, "If you would be so kind, sir," and extended to me a large lavender envelope edged in purple. The page it contained was topped by an elaborate crest under which flew an undecipherable monogram.

My dear Billy,

I had hoped to give a little lunch in my rooms tomorrow for the Comtesse de Vaucluse and M. de Monceau. However, it seems they must visit M. Bertrand at that hour. Instead we shall have what you Americans call Sunday brunch at eleven o'clock. Since your company is pleasing to the comtesse (and I need hardly mention, to me), I hope you will join us. It will be only we four.

*Cordially,
R. Bowers*

R.S.V.P.

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As I looked up, Marie Louise said, "I will take your answer, sir. You need not write a reply."

"Tell Madame Bowers I should be delighted," I said.

I was sufficiently in awe of Rosella to arrive in her rooms punctually at eleven o'clock, although I had not breakfasted until ten. I knocked on the door, and she replied with her inevitable, "*Entrez! Entrez!*" She was already sitting at, or rather, presiding over, the empty table. The other guests had evidently not arrived.

"Oh, Billy, you are the early bird! That is a quality which only the British and the Americans fully appreciate." This was the first remark that I had ever heard her make which implied that England and the United States were even on the same planet.

"Here, you sit on my left, and I shall pour you some coffee." I sat down. There was a lace tablecloth over the cover glass and the cutout figures peered eerily through it.

"Well, Billy, you seem quite at home on our island now. In fact, when I was talking to Eliane the other night, we decided you were practically an old resident . . . Pinta has been kind to me. Lord only knows, it's not the Côte d'Azur, but one can be happy here . . . I daresay, if I went back to France nowadays, I wouldn't even know the place."

Rosella was dressed in a flowing tunic of bottle green; she was very made up and covered with jewels. She reminded me

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of some bawdy old queen — Elizabeth or perhaps Catherine the Great . . .

"Do you think you *will* go back?" I asked.

"Good Lord, how does one ever know what one will do? There was a day not so long ago when I hadn't so much as heard of Pinta, and here I've spent twenty years now . . . Eliane tells me I must go back, but everything is sadly changed, I fear. Estelle d'Alloise is dead, poor Marie Triolet has such arthritis she can't stand up, and, Heaven save us, little Lili de Montmerchant is become a nun. Given up gossip for the confessional, I suppose. Oh, Europe is not what it once was, my love!"

She sat for a moment in reverie, fingering her pearls. I thought for one painful moment that she was going to launch another story concerning them.

"Here — have a crumpet while we wait for our young friends. I daresay they will be very late, but there are no clocks for lovers. I cannot say how happy this reconciliation makes me. We can at least tell ourselves that we have played Cupid and Psyche with that famous picnic we conceived. You know, I have been writing Eliane that she must return, for ever so long now. Why, before she left for the convent, the whole world supposed that someday they would be married. Christian was only a boy then — fresh back from the university, and not much older than you — and Eliane, a mere child, but they were so in love. When she was in the convent, she wrote to Christian every second day. Long letters so full of tenderness . . . He was in charge of island

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defense then. And when the war was over, you see, he sailed to France to claim his bride — poor fellow. When he got to Paris, all the world was talking of her engagement to Maxim de Vacluse. So back he came on the next boat — he only paused to dine with his brother and then he turned right about without so much as seeing her. Of course, I blame myself, for it was I who sent her to see the old Marquise de Gondeffleur, who introduced her to Maxim, her nephew. He was quite lacking in *esprit*, you know, for all his millions. Still, who can say in matters of the heart? We are all the toys of the gods. And in any case, here we are ten years later, and it's all come to the same thing . . . Well, no reason to starve ourselves, we aren't the ones who are living on kisses." She seized the camel bell and screamed for Marie Louise. But when the door opened, it was the countess who stood there with Christian at her side.

"Alas, not Marie Louise," she said. "It is only Christian and Eliane, and you will be angry with us that we are so late."

"Late, of course not! This is the land of *mañana*, they tell me — just that poor Billy is getting hungry. Here, Christian, you sit next to me and we will all have a bite to eat."

No sooner were Christian and Eliane seated than Marie Louise entered, followed by one of her minions. They both carried enormous trays, crowded with a profusion of covered dishes, jugs, bowls, and the like. These were set down in the middle of the table.

"Oh, Rosella," cried Eliane, "how delightful! It is a child's

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dream come true! Think of being allowed to have a chair at the buffet table itself!"

We all laughed and Christian said, "In return for such a privilege, we must all behave like grownups," and we laughed again.

"Oh, well," said Rosella, "you are all my children. I was telling Billy about life in France when I was a child. I often wonder if I shall see Paris again before I die . . . But I have lived here too long to change my ways, I fear."

"No, no," said Eliane, "we must all go back together, you, and I, and Christian, and Billy. We can row our little boat on the pond and feed the swans. Think what fun we should have! Truly, Rosella, the happiest parties are the smallest parties, for just a few dear friends."

"What I should like," said Rosella, "is to go to the Opera Gala once again. You and I would wear our jewels and our furs, and when our carriage drew up under the portecochere, everyone would think how handsome our gentlemen looked in their silk hats and white ties. How I used to love the opera and all the ladies in their splendid parures! Now, I wonder what has become of my tiara? I imagine Marie Louise has hidden it away under my scarves, and it would take a week to find it."

"'Tiaras,' my dear Madame Bowers!" said Christian. "Billy and I are simple men. We are not used to such grandeur."

"Fiddlesticks! You would be the beau of Paris if you chose . . . And then we should all go to Venice. I remem-

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ber Alicia Ferricini's *bal masqué* at the *palazzo* before that little hump-backed niece of hers married the Bulgarian prince — what a loathsome whining little fellow he was — all the footmen in livery lined up on the staircase, holding those lanterns on a stick — whatever-you-call-'ems. It was my first great night after I was given my pearls. We all came gliding up in gondolas — Ludovic, and Sasha Tsedsekoy and Clarence Dew and the old Grand Duchess Alix — Ah, I had a great success. That was the first night I met César Delmonico. Oh, he was so wickedly handsome, golden mustachios and hips like the stem of a wineglass. There he is with Marina Lotti," and she pointed vaguely at a faded brown photograph on the wall. "Though photographs could never do justice to his vigor."

"How wonderful," said Eliane, "to have our own ball — champagne and Viennese waltzes and gardenias everywhere — Oh, Christian, think of it!"

"My dear child, you and Rosella terrify me with your grand life. I am only a provincial gentleman — all I want is my garden, my dog, and my horse."

"Oh, no, but that is what I love above all things, Christian. So you see, after the ball, we will all go back to our chalet and gallop across the plains."

"Where, my dear, will you find a chalet on the plains?"

"Oh, Rosella, it is impossible to talk to a sensible man." We all laughed.

Christian smiled at me. "Billy is the only sensible one in our party. He does not indulge himself in these sand castles."

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"Yes, he shall," said Eliane. "Tell us, Billy, what you would like to do this very instant."

I sat mutely, my mind revolving, for I took the question in seriousness and it was hard to decide. I thought of traveling with the countess and Christian. I thought of warm sands and cool water. I thought of the noises of strange cities.

Finally, I said, "I guess I'd like it to be always Sunday, here on Pinta, just like it is now, and to have nothing change, ever."

The countess took my hand and gave me a warm smile. "Oh, Billy," she said, "you are so very, very sweet. I think you are the wisest of us all."

The fare at the Crooked Mile was ordinarily unpretentious, though not as Miss Ada sometimes said, "hawg-feed." But at Rosella's party the food was noteworthy both for its caliber and for the generosity with which it was apportioned. After gobbling creamed turkey, crumpets and gooseberry jam, kidney stew, French toast, hard biscuits, Westphalian ham, spoon bread and pompano, I slowed to the most fastidious nibbles. Then to washing my meal down with coffee inundated with chicory and finally to a standstill. Needless to say, I did not feel like joining in the general lunch which followed, and when Marie Louise announced the midday meal, I skulked down to my beach with a book. The sun was very hot but I did not swim, remembering all I had read about

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cramp. I tried sitting in Catbird's pool for a bit, an unsatisfactory compromise, and finally, I retired to his hammock and alternately read and dozed. Gradually, as I blinked out, the bright horizon retracted towards me like a tangible vapor which I was inhaling, until finally it seemed as if I had breathed it all up and there were only flat ledges of darkness around me. I could no longer read so I stretched and went down for a swim. Afterwards, I lay on the beach and watched the moon light, slow as a gas lamp. No doubt it is a trick of memory, but as I recall, all the nights on Pinta were illuminated by a peculiarly bright moon. I lay there, sifting the sand and thinking out a long piece of poetry which I told myself I must remember to write down. Of course, I never did and, in any case, I doubt that the words would have stood the light.

The moon rode high in the sky and at last began to sink again. I had heard nothing but the soundless words of my poem and the rustling of leaves and water for so long that my ear was sensitive to the sudden crackling of thickets from far above me. I sat up to listen as the noise seemed to grow closer. There were thwacking sounds, crashes, and a confused and angry noise emanating from the cliffs overhead. I was so used to my friend's tumultuous approach that I decided it must be Catbird, but I could not even guess what he could be about. Soon the hodgepodge of noises drew near enough to confirm my suspicions, and I could distinguish Catbird's voice raised in fevered oaths and shrill squeals, but his occu-

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pation was not clarified. It sounded indeed as if he were tearing up the forest and throwing it about.

"I see you, you lop-eared Gila monster," he shouted. "Help! Help!"

"Catbird! Catbird!" I called, and with no more ado, pulled on my trousers and started up the cataract. The rush of water drowned his cries, so that when I reached the top I had to stand quite still in the cold stream to attempt to ascertain his direction. The next thing I heard was a shriek, "Now I've got you, you black-bottomed baboon!" and simultaneously, I toppled back into the stream under Catbird's bulk.

We rolled over and over, under and through silver water, while he pummeled and clawed me with his wet paws, till finally I managed to kick him off me and draw breath. My nose and mouth were streaming water and my ears felt like bursting. I could not even think coherently, beyond wondering why my friend had suddenly gone mad.

"Is that you, Billy?" quavered a voice above me.

I could make no reply. I was too spent. The next thing I knew, my head was on Catbird's soggy lap, and he was wiping my forehead clumsily with wet leaves.

"My God," I said feebly, "no more water!"

"Are you all right, Billy boy?"

"As much all right as you can be when you've been lying in the water under a two-ton truck," I said bitterly. "What did you think you were doing?"

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"Well, look here, Billy. I sure as Godfrey didn't expect you pussyfooting around up here."

"Well, I heard you screaming, so I came," I said, sitting up and feeling my ribs tenderly. "The beach is right down there, you know."

"Well, thank the Lord's green grace!" said Catbird, abandoning me to my fate as he started down the watery path. "Let's scam before he catches us!"

"Who?" I said, rising to my feet and starting after him, infected by his fear. "Who's after you? The police?"

"Worse than that," said Catbird over his shoulder.

"Was it one of the natives?"

"Natives — sweet Matilda Ann — I could thrash the whole pack of natives if I were sewed into a sack. No, it was a fiend from hell, a great yellow dinosaur, a man-eater —"

"What do you *mean*, Catbird?"

"That mangy yellow horse with the triple jaws."

"Diable?" I queried recalling Catbird's feud with Rosella's cur.

"Call him anything you like, but not near me. Why, there's no word in the English language to describe him."

"Oh, come on, Catbird!" I said, greatly relieved. "He's harmless. Anyway, he never leaves the Crooked Mile. It must be your imagination."

We had reached the sand now and Catbird turned, exposing a gash in his hind thigh.

"Call this imagination?" he bellowed. "That werewolf did that with those poison fangs of his. He left the Crooked Mile

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tonight all right, though I guess it was my own fool fault. Never trust one of those natives. You'll be lucky to escape with a few broken bones. Well, what I need is a little hair of the dog, if you'll pardon the pun." He moved off into the shack and I trailed after him.

"What natives?" I said, utterly at sea.

"I knew he was a half-wit, but I didn't think he was treacherous. Why, he left me out there in the forest to die! It's as bad as murder. Good thing I didn't lose my head, or who knows what might have happened!" And he bubbled indignantly into his beer.

"Next time there's any dog-naping to be done, it's the Ada who does the footwork, I tell you that. All she does is sit and knit while I climb trees and tramp into the forest and —"

"You were trying to steal Diable?" I said in amazement.

"Hammer and tongs, Billy! Are you mad? Do you think I'm interested in suiciding myself? There's just one thing I want with that monster, which is a thousand miles between him and me."

"Well, what are you talking about?"

"Sainted aunt, kid. You're a little slow tonight. Haven't I been telling you? The Ada and I decided to borrow that trained flea of the countess's."

"You were going to steal *Prince Sam*?" I asked, horrified.

"Well, I don't mean take him to the court ball. No, I was just going to tuck him away in the old hip pocket."

"But, Catbird, you *can't*."

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"No such word in the English language as can't, like Caesar or some old geezer said. You know, that thimble-wit Archie that Murray uses to help out? Well, the Ada finds out that every evening about ten, the countess's maid takes H.R.H. Samuel out behind the Crooked Mile. Then she goes to the kitchen for coffee while the pooch wets down the dust. So all Archie has to do is snatch him up and everybody thinks he's wandered off . . ."

"But, why on earth, Catbird?"

"Why on earth? Moola! Clink! Shekels! Dinero! Rubles! Sable coats and little farms, and million-franc checks. Car-fare to Miami, for instance."

"But, my God, Eliane would be so upset! Take her jewels if you have to take something. It's like kidnaping."

"Just so long as she's ten grand worth upset, she gets that plucked chicken back safe and sound. Of course, he may be a little sulky at missing his midnight snack of caviar and champagne, but . . ."

"Have you got him? My Lord, you didn't kill him, did you?"

"Kill him? I didn't lay a finger on him. Don't you get it? That black pumpkin-head swiped the wrong dog! Why he thought anyone would pay twenty smackers for that canine cannibal is anyone's guess."

"Oh. You mean he brought Diable instead."

"Well, I'm glad to see that in the ninth inning, you finally picked up the score. That's just what he did. There I was standing in the woods, helpless and harmless, when Archie

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comes up grinning like the ape he is, with that vicious demon on a string, grinning just as big. So maybe I lose my temper a bit and take a swing at old Archie. Anyway, he turns tail, the yellow-belly, and drops the rope. There I am alone in the forest with man's best friend. Guess he thought this must be Thanksgiving and I'm the turkey. So I take off too, with Rover snapping at my backside. I lost my light, I lost my way, I lost ten pounds. Jerusalem, Billy, I tell you it's a miracle I'm alive!"

"Yes, but listen, Catbird," I said seriously, "you *can't* steal Prince Sam, really. It would break Eliane's heart. It's inhuman. Please try to think of something else."

"There isn't anything else. Believe me, kid. I wouldn't spend my night in the forest waiting for that dusky numbskull if there were an easier way. Anyway, Billy, let's not play hearts and flowers. I'm not going to harm one of those three hairs on his head."

"It isn't that, Catbird . . ."

"Oh, turn in the tin star, Billy. Look, here's what. I'll give you the high sign before the phantom strikes again, and you can run around and hold the countess's hand till Ada turns up with the little roach and the whole town busts out dancing."

Although I felt like a traitor to the countess, I left it at that. In my cowardly fashion, I tried to put the whole business from my mind, hoping against hope that the gods who amused themselves with Catbird would continue to preserve his impotence.

Chapter Nine

THE DAYS went by and I heard no more of Catbird's threat. Gradually, my fears were allayed and I began once again to relax and expand. I even resumed my lamentable job on the countess's portrait, more because I did not know how to discontinue it, than through any determination to persevere. I felt that I could ask no more from life than this — to continue on Pinta in the fair weather with Catbird, the countess, and Christian for my friends. I often said this aloud in a sort of offhand fashion. I did not believe in God, but on the long chance that He existed, I thought it best to let Him know my preferences. I was still enough of a child to believe

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that if a situation was pleasing to me, it must continue to remain static, and indeed, in this case, I had good reason to believe it would, for Rosella, the countess's self-appointed oracle, told me that Eliane would never again leave Pinta. She had come to spend two weeks, but three had now gone by and she had not marked them. In my complacency, I accepted this somehow as my due. Consequently, the news that Eliane broke to Rosella and me one morning was most unexpected.

We had been sitting on the veranda awaiting Christian's arrival (I use the plural, for Rosella and I had become vicarious participants in this romance), and while we waited, Rosella had been regaling us, after her fashion, with gossip of several decades vintage. I believed that I was listening only to the flow of her voice flotsamed with italics of names, till I heard the countess say in her soft unemphatic voice, "Oh, but then I will miss seeing your fine Quintana, for I must leave for Paris this Sunday." My mind, which I had thought half asleep, responded to the shock by replaying Rosella's words. I was amazed to discover that I had recorded the fact that a woman named Simone de Venable had a Siamese lover who had stabbed the matador Quintana in a fit of jealousy, and that this same Quintana was to visit the island in a fortnight on his way up to Mexico City. And, again, I heard in my mind the countess's unbelievable words.

I must have looked just as stunned as Rosella did, for the countess gave a little embarrassed laugh and said, "But surely you did not expect me to stay here forever? Already I have

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dillied and dallied shockingly. Somewhere in Paris there is a very imposing lawyer frowning and tapping his foot and saying to his equally imposing colleague, 'Where is that silly woman and what can she be doing?' And together they are composing a speech to chide me for my tardiness. You see, I am a slave to Maxim's holdings. In truth, I am little better than a puppet, pulled unwillingly here and there so that I can write my name and try to tell men much wiser than I what they should do with this or that. Already I am overdue. I must be in Paris on the fifteenth and that means that there is nothing for it but to fly from Charlottetown, a thing I do not care for at all."

"Pish-tish, child," Rosella broke in. "What utter nonsense. You must be moon-struck to think of going back so soon. Women never understand affairs and it doesn't pay to meddle. I am sure they can get along very nicely without you and, after all, it must be fifteen years since you were last in Pinta. I'm not saying the climate couldn't be improved upon — and it's hardly the *ne plus ultra* socially, I admit, but it is your home . . . and as you have found out, there are other inducements," and she gave the countess an arch look. "In any case, we can't afford to lose you. Billy and I would be dreadfully dull here without you. We would bore each other to distraction and then he would leave and I would be left here for all eternity with no one to talk to and nothing to do with my days but to try to avoid that terrible Lee and Mr. Jail-bird."

"Please, Rosella," said Eliane, "do not make it more diffi-

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cult. If you only knew how I shall miss you and Billy . . .”

“Me and Billy indeed! We don’t flatter ourselves that you have postponed your departure on our account! We all know Christian is the one you are thinking of.”

Eliane turned quite pink. “Oh, no, but you see, Rosella, I think — that is, I hope — that perhaps in the spring, Christian may be coming to Paris . . .”

“Oh, Billy!” cried Rosella, clapping her hands. “Can you conceive of it? The ardent Latins! The passions of the south! Here after twenty years he has finally swept her off her feet! Why, any tup-penny-half-penny Yorkshire man is more romantic! Oh, my Lord! Well, Eliane, what a piece of good news, for all your circumspection! When and where shall you be married? For mark my words, I shall be there.”

“Oh, please, Rosella,” stammered the countess. “That is not the — the kind of announcement for a lady to make, particularly when no one has asked her to be married.”

“Oh, is that all?” said Rosella. “Fiddlesticks! Why, the world and all knows that Christian worships you and only you, and has for these twenty years. Why do you think he has lived like a hermit all this time and never thought of another woman? Really, it is the great love story of our time and I am proud to have had a hand in it . . . Well, if you must go, you must, but at least we know now that we will have you both back often and that is something . . . You leave on Sunday, eh? Well, we must have a ball. Not that there are so many families that one would want to ask, but

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still we can make do . . . We *must* make do . . . I shall ring up the governor . . .”

“Oh, please, Rosella, I beg you! No parties! You must let me steal away pretending I will be back a night or two later!”

Then Christian drove up and carried Eliane off, leaving Rosella and me on the veranda. With barely an apology, she retreated inside. Her displays of affection to me were, like her demonstrations towards Prince Sam, mainly for the benefit of the countess. I had more than once seen her shove the little dog from her ankle when she thought no one was watching and I was confident that there were moments when she felt like treating me in the same fashion.

I felt utterly abandoned now and very sorry for myself as I sat alone on the porch. It was as incredible as death to me that the countess should be leaving. Christian would see her in the spring, but when would I see her again? And where would I go in the meantime? I told myself that I wished she had never come. We had all been so happy before she had come . . . Hadn't we?

There was, of course, a ball. The governor, ordered rather than aided by Rosella, sent out cards for a masquerade Friday night.

“On shipboard, two nights before disembarking,” Rosella

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told me, "there is always a masquerade ball," and she grandly disregarded the fact that most of the inhabitants of Pinta were temperamentally and practically ill-equipped for such an eventuality.

The residents of the Crooked Mile received their cards in a state of high excitement. Even Colonel Bagby decided to attend, making his wife utterly inarticulate with gratitude and pleasure. Indeed, only Catbird remained unmoved, because, as it turned out, he was the unique oversight in the guest list.

"What's all the hoopla about at the governor's palace on Friday?" he asked me.

"Oh, it's just a little party to say good-by to Eliane," I said, a trifle embarrassed.

"*Little* party! To hear the Ada talk, you'd think it's the biggest thing since Grant burned Richmond. You going?"

"I suppose so," I said.

"I wonder why I didn't get an invite." I had heard Rosella say that one of the principal pleasures of the ball was the exclusion of Catbird, but I did not feel like sharing this confidence.

"I guess the governor doesn't know you," I said.

"I'll bet he knows me as well as he knows old Ada — or as well as he knows *you*, for that matter . . . No, I guess it's the countess. Just didn't have the Continental touch when I pinched the royal backside . . . It's a dress-up, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I know, old Ada is planning to go as a piece of Southern

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fried chicken or something . . . Whose idea was this costume business? Is the governor in the garment trade?"

"No. Rosella thought it up. Something to do with ship-board parties."

"Rosella," he said approvingly. "I might have known! Who else would try to stage the Ziegfeld Follies on this sand bar! Well, I don't see why *I* should miss the fun just because the countess is a bit goosey! Guess I'll come along, too."

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "You'll probably have to show cards or something."

"I'll come as Prince Sam and drop one of his calling cards right on the staircase." And he gave a bellow.

I had nothing further to say, but I felt that Rosella might be more than a little combustible when she noticed Catbird's unwelcome presence.

There were five days before the ball, and I devoted them solely to avoiding the countess. I could not help but take her departure as a personal slight. After all, she could always discover her other friends on Pinta at the end of a mailing address, but I could have no such tangent, professional transient that I was. The cavalier fashion in which she had disposed of her departure was particularly galling. I felt that the least she could have done was to tell me privately, and with some show of feeling.

Consequently, I made a point of shunning Eliane. I

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wandered off when she approached. I stayed away from the places she frequented, and the few times our paths crossed and she smiled and spoke to me, I gave her only the vaguest of looks, and the most perfunctory answers. If this behavior made a wound in the countess's composure, she bore it stoically. I only know I was miserably unhappy. I felt, to the last tick, the elapsing hours I was squandering and I paced my little beach, restless and forlorn, for five days, hoping for — I know not what — perhaps a messenger bearing an abject apology from Eliane. But no messenger came riding, and my pride did not admit me to abandon my role.

The solitude of my chosen St. Helena was almost inviolate. Catbird had been avoiding the beach lately, engrossed in his acquaintanceship with a free-spending Portuguese speculator. Once, in desperation, I even asked Tiger if he would like to go swimming with me. Tiger had looked at me with some surprise.

"Swimming in a boat?" he said.

"No," I said. "Off a beach."

"You mean, back to the town beach?"

"No," I said. "Another beach, a secret beach."

"Oh, a secret. How do you get there?"

"You walk through the woods. You have to know the way."

"I see." He was silent and speculative for a moment. "What would we do when we got to that beach?"

"Nothing much. Go swimming. Or build castles. Would you like to come?"

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Tiger shook his head. "No, I don't think so. There are too many of these things I have to arrange before tonight," and he went back to his bottles. So I spent my time alone, unrewarded as unrewarding.

The Friday of the ball came and I had exchanged no more than a few monosyllabic trivialities with Eliane. The time spent exiled from her company seemed so flat and non-dimensional to me that but for the memory of my sadness and ennui, I would have believed the Friday, by some strange juxtaposition of days, to have followed that unfortunate Sunday on the veranda. I had wasted five days and I had, as yet, no notion of what I was to wear, a fate with which my fellow guests at Rosella's were peculiarly unsympathetic.

For the inmates of the Crooked Mile had very definite, if somewhat stereotyped, conceptions of masquerade costumes, and they spent the day attempting to cajole or intimidate Marie Louise into altering fact to match their fantasy. Though everyone kept his costume secret, between the hints given at large and the orders given to Marie Louise, it was not difficult to deduce in what fashion the guests intended to disguise themselves. Only Colonel Bagby gave no clues and made no demands, thereby arousing the greatest curiosity.

After toying with various notions, I decided to abandon pretension, as well I must with such a paucity of preparation, and come as a calypso. I had a tattered pair of white ducks, and I knotted my shirttail at my waist. My skin was dark enough to require no lampblack. The final touch was a brass

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curtain ring which I suspended from a loop of thread over my ear.

Rosella had commandeered me for the evening and ordered me to stop by for her at nine sharp. We were then to proceed to the governor's mansion in Dominique's car. I never played fast and loose with the time when meeting Rosella and, therefore, I gave my reflection only the swiftest approbation before descending to her room. I had expected gaudy dishabille, but, to my surprise and, indeed, my disappointment, Rosella was spread across her couch playing patience, dressed as usual in her pearls and a flowing robe. Marie Louise hovered nearby with a heavily anxious air.

Rosella's eyes traveled slowly up and down me and she made a *moue*. I could see that my disappointment was paltry as compared to hers.

"My word," she said, "is *that* what you are going to wear? Really, I *had* hoped for a bit more. One would have thought we had enough of these miserable blacks on this island without your trying to add to the crew. Ah, well, *che sarà, sarà* . . . If you could only have seen the *bals masqués* we had when I was a girl — Cinderella and Cleopatra . . . Why, Nicky Vishilov came once as Puss in Boots with a cat's face made of sable . . . Well, in any case, I must see this through." She heaved herself to her feet. "But, do you really intend to go to a ball barefoot?"

"I'm supposed to be a calypso."

"Calypso, indeed! Well, at any rate, you must put something on your feet, even if it's only tennis shoes. Even if

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you don't care about the rest of us, you'd do as well to protect yourself from hookworm."

"All right," I said.

"Very well, then. We'll meet you in front. Marie Louise, my sword."

I watched in fascination as Rosella marched out of her bedroom followed discreetly by Marie Louise, carrying a large sack and a sheathed sword, for what dark purpose, I could hardly guess. In any case, I ran to fetch my shoes.

We proceeded to the governor's mansion. It was Rosella's intention, so she told me, to oversee the arrangements and then to dress at her leisure. Staring at her odd accouterments, I wondered what her costume could be. We were greeted at the door by the governor's wife, an apathetic Columbine. She was surprised to see Rosella and more than mystified as to what function Marie Louise and I might serve. Apparently she must have decided that I was one of the servants, for she gave Rosella a pale smile and chose to ignore Marie Louise and myself.

"*Bon soir, Françoise,*" Rosella responded to the woman's unconvincing welcome. "I suppose that's your costume. Well. I have come to see to the arrangements." She swept by the plain little lady and made her way toward the reception rooms. The great hall had been cleared for dancing. There was a buffet table, gleaming with silver, in the dining room, and little tables surrounded by gold chairs had been arranged in the smaller chambers.

"It's as good as I could have hoped, I suppose. Now I

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shall have a table in the ballroom seating ten. Otherwise, we will let it go as it is, except that you must move the buffet in front of the windows, and you will need twenty more chairs on the veranda."

After the colored footmen had set Rosella's table as she directed, by the arch that led from the main hall to the dining room, she produced a small deck of gold-rimmed place cards which she set around the table. This completed, she turned once again to the governor's wife. "I must go up to dress now. I will be down before the guests arrive and I dare say Mr. Axel will keep you entertained in the meantime. He is an American." With this, she swept up the stairs with Marie Louise fluttering in her wake, and the governor's wife and I were left staring at each other.

"You are an American, Miss Bowers says."

"Yes," I replied.

"You are a guest of Miss Bowers's, perhaps."

"Yes," I said, and then, feeling some amplification was necessary on my part, I repeated, "Yes, I am staying at the Crooked Mile."

"You have perhaps been here since a long time."

"I have been here about two months now."

"I hope you enjoy to be on our island."

"Yes. I like it very much."

Such was the tenor of our conversation. We had carried on haltingly in this fashion for perhaps half an hour and, having exhausted the color of the water and the warmth of the air, were staring at each other with the mute loathing

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that such an exchange engenders when the governor came downstairs.

His wife introduced me as Mr. Maxie, an American. The governor dismissed me with a courtly bow. "We are always flattered to have an American in our midst, sir," he said, and abandoned me to his wife and our agonizing colloquy. I longed for Rosella to appear so that I could take shelter behind her barrage of conversation.

Soon the guests began to arrive in twos and threes. I had met almost none of them and only a very few of the faces were familiar to me. At first the governor's wife introduced me with painful politeness, "Mr. Maxie, an American." "Mr. Maxie, an American." In moments of pressure, she sometimes varied this with, "Mr. American, a Maxie," but no one seemed either to notice or care. And I was able to make no more headway with the newcomers than I had with the governor's wife. At last there was a sufficient crowd to enable me to retire from this desiccating limelight and I retreated gratefully into anonymity. I took a glass of champagne to the veranda, and sitting on the rail, I gazed at the crowd through the French windows.

Had the ladies of the courts of the Louis's made their own clothes from indifferent yard goods, they might have looked like the ladies of Pinta that night. There were a plethora of Pompadours, Marie Antoinettes, and DuBarrys. What were left over were principally shepherdesses and gypsies, while the men leaned toward pirates and gauchos, with a sprinkling of chefs and Tyroleans. Then the shepherd-

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esses, gauchos, court ladies, and chefs began to run together and blur in the carefree figures of the dance. Soon I could follow their forms only as revolving wheels, and wheels within wheels of color.

Though the music was gay, I found something disquieting in the spectacle of this aggregate pretending to be what they were not. It made my own position so much the more giddy. I half decided not to watch but kept eyeing the ballroom nevertheless for one more shake of the kaleidoscope, lest I should miss some unique and wonderful pattern, when quite suddenly the music halted and the figures fell from their orbits and turned in one accord to the staircase. I could not see the cynosure, and overcome with curiosity, I crept inside.

There on the stairs was a figure from my nursery nightmares — the boggy man in whom I had believed sporadically. Superhumanly tall, crimson, with matted black hair, it preened itself on the landing. "Rosella," cried the governor, running up the stairs. The figure stepped out from its shadow and I saw that it must indeed be Rosella — Rosella clad in a tremendous red satin blouse and pantaloons, wearing patent leather boots with four-inch heels, covered with lace and jewels, with plumes bedizening her shoulder-length curled black wig; Rosella flashing a sword in her right hand, while around her neck lay the famous pearls.

"Not Rosella," she cried, "but Cristoforo Colombo!" The crowd clapped and Rosella descended the stairs on the governor's arm with ponderous grace. Not the least bizarre

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of the details of her *maquillage* was the fact that, although she was heavily rouged and mascaraed, and her lips had been applied in a crimson gash of color, she sported a curling black mustache culled from the same strange fabric as her wig. Yet the net result was not that of a woman masquerading as a man, but that of a man masquerading as a woman. Her eyes roved the room till they lit me up in my shadowy corner, and she beckoned imperiously. There was nothing for it but to obey.

"Well, Billy," she said to me when I lagged up, "you look quite *bouleversé*. Didn't you know me?"

"No," I said. "As a matter of fact, I didn't."

She gave a pleased smile which titillated her mustachios. "Marie Louise told me I should go as Clotilda or Manon, my two greatest triumphs, but I told her, no, no, I should personate Columbus, my spiritual father."

I stared at her costume, wondering how she could have hit upon this fashion of portraying the hardy explorer. Black-beard perhaps, but hardly Christopher.

"I can see you're quite taken aback to see a real costume," Rosella said. "This is monkey fur, you know," she told me, stroking her wig. The idea made me shudder. "Well," she said, "let us be seated, Billy. I should have thought Eliane would be here by now, but I fear she tells time by the calendar these days." She seized my arm and we proceeded, her sword clanking against my leg, to the table she had ordered in the hall. I was gratified to find that my name had been honored on one of the gilt-edged cards. I sat across the

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table from Rosella, in the designated place, while she scanned the ballroom for other candidates.

"Anne, Anne!" she bellowed, and beckoning a hawk-faced woman in sea-green chiffon out of the arms of a perspiring Romeo, she seated her next to me, flinging at me the information that she was Madame St. Denis, before resuming her supervision of the dancers.

I was overcome by my dinner companion, by her halo of perfume, by the strange texture of her face, so carefully coated and subtly colored with alien substances that her skin resembled some pale erotic mineral, her eyes set in it like two precious stones. I half turned, like Rosella, to watch the floor and to escape that dark gaze that fastened on me so intently that I felt sure Madame St. Denis must know that I had been trespassing on her beach to a degree that might better be described as squatting. But Madame St. Denis did not allow me my solitude. She picked up my card and stared at it, before addressing me in English.

"You are not French, Mr. Axel?" she said in a voice which, although a little harsh, was not unpleasant.

"No, English," I said.

"Ah," she said, "I was afraid you were another of these formidable Americans who are always coming, like the Goths, to civilize us all."

I felt myself go quite hot. For once I had not meant to lie. I had so accustomed myself that evening to protesting to the governor's friends that I spoke mainly English, that her question had ambushed me.

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"You must know that Rosella has been maligning you hideously. She tells everyone you come from the United States. But then she has only a nodding acquaintance with the truth. Where do you come from in England?"

"Oh, London," I said, a drowning man.

"How clever. I am quite foolish about London — the way Americans insist they feel about Paris. And where do you live in London?"

"Trafalgar Square," I ventured, my tongue dry, trying desperately to remember in what connotation I had heard that name.

"Indeed," she said. "In the Gallery, or up with dear Lord Nelson?"

I didn't know in the least what she was talking about, so I tried what sounded like the more elegant of the two.

"Near Lord Nelson."

"Oh," she said, "how airy. I think you are wise. And doubtless you received your education in Great Oxford Street." I drew a breath of relief that I seemed to have passed my inquisition.

"Do you smoke, Mr. Axel?" she continued. I nodded. "Oh, I am not all that curious. What I wished was a cigarette, if you would be so kind."

I fumbled around, and was forced to admit that I had forgotten my cigarettes. I told her that I would go to find her some if she wished, but she dismissed the suggestion.

"No, no, it doesn't matter. I only wanted some little occupation. You know, I find you a very challenging conversa-

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tionalist, Mr. Axel. If you can think of nothing else to say, you might admire my dress or my figure."

"I was thinking your dress looks too pretty to be a costume," I said, quite sincerely.

She clapped her hands. "Bravo, Mr. Axel, and indeed it isn't a costume. Monsieur Desses would thank you. I came without a costume, for I had not the time nor the materials to acquit myself well. And when I look about me — there, for example! Now, who is that truly remarkable clan at the door? Those are Americans for you! If I were to make myself up like such a fool, at least I would try to enjoy myself."

I followed her gaze to the entrance where Colonel Bagby stood dejectedly in his dinner clothes, playing reluctant sultan to a twittering harem. Miss Ada, for once the least extraordinary of the group, had assumed the white ruffled gown of the other evening, which she had enlivened by a poinsettia thrust into the bosom. Her coiffure alternated precarious ringlets with little white bows and she brandished a cap pistol. Mrs. Kungle was done up as a dubious Spanish lady in several dirndls of various lengths, a piece of fan coral attached to her head trailing black veiling, and an artificial red rose, which she kept poking in her mouth in the way that a novice smoker uses a cigarette. But Miss Floss was by all odds the most eye-catching. The lower half of her body was encased in green muslin, painted crudely to simulate fish scales and ending in two points, beneath which her large, sneakered feet protruded. Above the waist, she wore a pink cardigan sweater buttoned in the back.

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Her long gray hair streamed down almost to her waist, and as she stumped along, she combed it with a large black comb. After a moment's reflection, it became apparent that she was disguised as a mermaid.

"Oh, no, but they are wonderful," crowed Anne St. Denis. "Surely they should get the prize! But what do they represent? Americans love Biblical subjects, so I daresay it is Jonah and the whale. Or perhaps the trials of Job. Please, Rosella, you must look at this tableau immediately."

But Rosella had drawn her breath in and was staring in quite a different direction.

"Oh, but she is magnificent!" she cried. "What simplicity! What majesty!"

These adjectives could hardly be applied to Miss Floss. I turned to see the countess approaching us. Indeed she was breathtaking. She was dressed in a flowing gown of antique satin and swathed in veiling. Her hair was coiled beneath a coronet and her eyes were shining and her cheeks flushed.

"Well, but what is so remarkable?" said Madame St. Denis to me in an undertone. "Unless it is that she has come as a bride, which I consider in questionable taste under the circumstances. But then I am not one of the devotees of la comtesse, as it is not hard to discover. But you must excuse me, for I am sure she is a great friend of yours."

"No," I said. "I scarcely know her."

"Rosella," said Eliane, "how wicked you look! Good evening, Anne. And Billy — why I hardly knew you. And you see here is Christian dressed as — but you can see — as

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Simon Legree. As always — But now he shows his whip." Christian was beside her dressed in jodhpurs and an open shirt, carrying a coiled whip.

"Nothing would satisfy Eliane but that I should come as a tyrant," said Christian.

"Is that your wedding dress, dear one?" said Madame St. Denis. "But I find it enchanting!"

"No, no," said Eliane in some confusion. "It was my grand-mama's. My mother brought it over from France with her. It was for — but, of course, no one has worn it since —"

"Charming," said Anne St. Denis with a radiant smile.

"Come, come," said Rosella. "Here, Christian, you must sit here on my right, and then Eliane, and here is the governor for your left. Jacques, you must bring Armand St. Denis and the Des Longues. It is time we all sat down."

At this moment, the Crooked Mile group recognized us, and with much waving and caterwauling, bore down upon us.

"My dear," said Anne St. Denis, "surely those people do not mean to attack us!"

But, in fact, they were all too friendly. The colonel stood aloof, but Miss Floss, Mrs. Kungle, and Miss Lee, abetted by Mrs. Bagby in a kimono, enthused over all our costumes and showed off their own.

"I'm Belle Snodgrass," Miss Ada clarified to me. "And you won't believe it, but this gun goes off! Why, any kind of firearms just plain terrifies me to death, so you can visualize my perturbation!"

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"And who do you represent, Mrs. Snodgrass?" asked Madame St. Denis.

"Why, I represent Belle *Snodgrass*!" Miss Ada began, but Madame St. Denis merely shrugged her shoulders and abandoned this hopeless conversation by addressing her neighbor on the right.

Although I tried my best to be hospitable, Rosella quite pointedly dismissed the Crooked Mile contingent, and eventually they moved on, always in a body, never mingling with the rest of the party.

When they had receded beyond hope of recall, Madame St. Denis once again presented me with her face.

"So we are safe," she said, and gave a little sigh. "Is it not curious how Americans always form themselves into a sort of despicable elite? Look at them now, like a school of great carp in a pool of goldfish. I am told they are a young nation — why are they then so ugly?"

Certainly the moment had long passed when I could confess my nationality. I cast about for some topic divorced from citizenship.

"Do you live here always?" I asked.

"Do you mean all year round? I must look to you like a transvestite Edmond Dantes. No indeed, Armand and I come here for a month or two every year while Armand looks after his affairs. For years, of course, I absolutely refused to come. Well, one year I came, I don't remember why — curiosity, or Armand's bullying, or an unhappy affair . . . At any rate, I sat in the shade and read, and never

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talked to a soul, because there isn't a soul to talk to, and wrote letters to my old aunt in Toulouse, who was so thrilled to hear from me that she has been crocheting the most hideous gloves for me ever since. It was all very restful, and not really barbaric at all. Then, of course, when I returned to Paris, with neither blue circles under my eyes, nor my skin burned umber, everyone concluded I had had my face lifted, and so I have lately acquired quite a reputation as a beauty."

"You never go out in the sun?"

"Never, never, never. I hate bikinis. It is all very well for a man to get sunburned. It is, in fact, becoming. I always say men should run around naked outdoors and be fully dressed indoors, and women should be fully dressed outdoors and run around naked indoors . . . Of course, when you see these young girls in bikinis, they are all the color of animals, and it seems remarkable that their bodies are not covered with long hair."

At this point, Madame Des Longues, the brittle-looking gray-haired woman on my left, leaned across me and began to chatter away to Madame St. Denis in voluminous French. At length Madame St. Denis laughed and said in English, "Gently, Lise. Mr. Axel understands not a word of French, so our wit is wasted on him. Let us speak in English from now on. Madame Des Longues was telling me that she considered Eliane de Vacluse the most beautiful young woman here tonight. Do you think that is true?"

Eliane was dancing with the governor now and indeed

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looked very beautiful. I really didn't know what to say, afraid of either denying the obvious or offending Madame St. Denis.

"I think she is very pretty," I said, "but then, I think women are always more beautiful before you know them at all well. You've known her longer than I have and I suppose you see her a lot in Paris, so you're probably quite used to the way she looks."

"Know her, yes. See her, no. She does not take the role of the rich man's widow lightly. She has made sure that she need never marry again. And since I neither lunch at the Bourse nor week-end with my attorney, I see her very little."

Madame Des Longues turned to me with a half smile. "Anne always speaks with acid on her tongue, Mr. Axel. You must not believe that she is not fond of Eliane. They have been friends since they were little girls of fourteen years."

"Yes, my dear Lise, and I must tell you that, while I think she is very good at being fourteen, she is not so good at being thirty-eight."

Madame Des Longues cried, "Ah-ah!" and threw up her hands, and then she once more stretched her long neck across my line of vision and began to gabble in French. I could only catch one word in ten, and, although I was quite anxious to follow, for the conversation concerned Eliane, I finally gave up and set my mind adrift altogether.

I was finally aroused by a noise from across the table.

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Rosella had emitted a curious sound, somewhere between a roar and a belch.

"*Mon Dieu*," she cried. "The rabble is at the gates. Billy, Billy," she demanded, tapping me with her saber to gain my more complete attention. "Is not that that terrible man mountain who consorts with Lee?"

I dared not look where she was pointing.

"No, no," I said hurriedly. "It couldn't be."

"Oh, my word! I can see him in the light now! It is *indeed*! That bulk is unmistakable! I shall have to see to this immediately!" And she hoisted herself to her feet.

"Who is it? Who is it?" begged Anne St. Denis, but I had no time to expatiate.

"Come with me, Billy," Rosella commanded. "We'll see how that human suppository can explain himself away."

Reluctantly, I followed behind Rosella's flank. My friend was standing in the doorway, drinking in the picture before him, and in turn, acknowledging the stares of the crowd. Though he was hardly recognizable as human, he was easily recognizable as Catbird, and a Catbird more than a little under the weather, for he was reeling slightly and looked, in his extraordinary garb, like the fantasy of some depraved and feeble mind.

It was evident that his costume, while mystifying, had been assembled with some relish. The color and profusion of garments he had assumed challenged any precise inventory, but prominent among his encumbrances were an enormous pair of pink rayon bloomers which drooped to his

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knees, a dirty green cape lined with the fatuous reminiscence of ermine, some Turkish slippers, a lace blouse, the bosom of which was studded with stars and medals, some plausible-looking bracelets, a pair of gray gaiters, and a red paper mustache. The final bizarre touch was a gold cardboard crown set rakishly on his damp curls. He was sweating profusely.

He looked a little dazed but supremely happy, and he gave Rosella and me a friendly smile, as we bore down on him.

"Ahoy, there, chappies!" he bellowed. "Top o' the morning, Billy. Who's your fat friend?"

Remembering Rosella's sword, I only hoped there would be no bloodshed.

Rosella planted her hands on her hips and let an impressive silence fall which I was too cowardly to break. Finally, she spoke, slowly and ponderously.

"Mr. Stanhope, I can only hope for all of our sakes that you are here through some error."

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. B. I didn't know you under all the five o'clock shadow. Should have counted on Billy — they say the oldest wine's the sweetest! Well, Mrs. B., you hit the nail on the noggin. I'm here through an error. Ho, ho, ho! Someone forgot to invite me."

His laughter was not infectious.

"I can assure you, Mr. Stanhope, that the oversight was deliberate. Now, having satisfied your curiosity on that point, it might be wiser if you went to disport yourself before some less fastidious gathering. I am sure you always find

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yourself welcome at Madame La Farge's establishment and doubtless she will be happy to have you return those clothes to her."

And Rosella gave the satisfied smirk of one who has made a telling thrust.

Catbird spluttered. "No can do," he said finally. "I just came from there," and he gave one of his bellows. "You got to think of something better than that, Rosie, old girl."

"How dare you address me by my Christian name, you maggot? Now be off, before I call the officer!"

Catbird's lower lip drooped. "Oh, now, be a sport, Rosie. After I went to all this trouble to dress up just to please you, you shouldn't give me the cold shoulder!"

"Please *me*? Now really, Mr. Stanhope, what an unflattering picture you must have of my tastes. Just what *are* you supposed to represent? A walking compost heap?"

"Oh, now, Rosie! You mean to say you don't recognize me? Old King Solomon always warned me you were a heartless coquette, but I never would have thought you'd be so quick to forget your old pal, Ludovic Rex."

I gasped. The best that could be hoped for now was instant decapitation.

"Yes, you're certainly a fickle one. It was a night like this back in old Budapest that you . . ."

Rosella was shaking all over, but instead of the stream of vituperation which I expected her to expel, she began to give vent to antique wheezes of laughter.

"He, he, he!" she chortled. "Ludovic! Well, of all the

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cheek!" and her monkey fur trembled, her sword clinked with mirth.

"Sure, Ludovic!" said Catbird, quick to press his advantage. "I can see it was just another summer romance to you, but I can still remember that grand old night skinny-dipping in the Bosphorus, when I gave you those invaluable pearls." He gave me a big wink.

But Rosella continued to cry, "Ludovic! Ludovic! Oh, my word!" and to issue peal after peal of her rancid guffaws.

Finally she rearranged her wig and her mustachios and said, "Oh, my dear man, you don't know how amusing this is! Poor Ludovic! And he was such a poor little *sprig* of a man — oh, dear me! But come along, come along! I must show Eliane. She will die laughing!"

Rosella took Catbird by the arm and led him through the throng. Although it seemed to me they elicited more embarrassment than amusement, they continued to howl with glee, and it was obvious that both of them were having an immensely good time.

Because I had nowhere else to go, I returned to the table and to Madame St. Denis, who was taking great pleasure in this bizarre spectacle.

"What has happened?" she asked me. "Has Rosella found a long lost son?"

"No," I said, "it's a man named Carleton B. Stanza who's staying at the de l'Europe."

"Indeed. Well, already I dislike him as much as anyone I do not know."

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The governor came over and asked Madame St. Denis to dance.

"I would love to," she said, "if you can promise to keep me out of the path of the two mastodons." There could be no doubt as to whom she meant.

The orchestra was playing a waltz — a popular choice, for soon I was the only one left seated at our table. I smoked a cigarette and twiddled with the tablecloth, feeling very self-conscious, and finally, concluding that I dreaded more than looked forward to the return of my table companions, I got up and slunk away into the crowds.

I had a few drinks by myself, in a secluded spot, from which neither Rosella's masterful eye nor Miss Ada's avowed predilection for the waltz could draw me. I dallied briefly with the idea of finding a pretty girl to dance with to demonstrate to Eliane that I was not totally under her sway.

However, there seemed to be a distinct scarcity of this commodity. Most of the women present were the far side of middle age and of the younger women, none looked prepossessing, with the possible exception of Madame St. Denis, but the idea of dancing with her scared me almost as much as did the idea of being seen by her dancing with Mrs. Bagby or Mrs. Kungle.

I was standing near the stairs attempting to look like part of the crowd when Christian came up to me. He was without Eliane, who I presumed must be dancing, although I had been scanning the floor for her in vain.

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"Hello, Billy," Christian said. "I thought you would be dancing with all the pretty girls."

"Do you mean Rosella," I asked, "or Miss Floss? Anyway, I don't dance."

"Well, that is sad for the ladies, but happy for us. Eliane and I have a little table out on the terrace. It is cool there, and very pleasant. You must sit with us and have a glass of champagne."

Since there was no possible excuse, I followed him. Eliane was sitting at the table, pale and lovely in the candlelight.

"Oh, Billy," she cried, "how handsome you are! What are you? A pirate?"

"No," I said. "Rosella's a pirate. I'm a calypso."

"Of course. A calypso. How clever."

"Rosella didn't think so. She said I should have come in a cat's mask made of sable fur."

"Isn't she extraordinary? Anyway, I think you look wonderful. You are just as handsome as Christian. And I would be very glad to see you, whatever you came as."

"I'm glad to see you."

"I hope so," she said. "I had felt that perhaps you were avoiding me . . . that I had offended you in some fashion without meaning to . . ."

"No," I said, embarrassed by the truth. "Of course not."

"I am very glad of that. There is only one thing unfortunate about being very happy and that is that you are sometimes very thoughtless."

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"Are you so very happy?" I asked, more wounded than ever.

"Yes. Very, very happy," she said, smiling, first at Christian and then at me. "And I want you to be very happy for me."

"Of course," I said.

"Oh, Billy," she said, "it is a wonderful thing to have come back to Pinta. I feel so sorry that that poor Ponce de Leon did not travel this far in his search, for most certainly the waters of this island contain the most miraculous elixir. I have come here and it seems that the years have burned away in a mist. And I have become again a person I thought many steps behind me, with feelings and hopes that I thought never to resume. Oh, Billy, it is so marvelous to come back to the house of your father after so many years and find that nothing has changed. Nothing," she said emphatically, and clasped Christian's arm. Christian was looking at Eliane, a half-smile on his face, while he turned the stem of his glass about and about.

"But you are too young to understand, Billy, how wonderful it is to feel again in a heart you had thought long dead. And I know this is silly to you — except perhaps if you are fond of me, you would like to know — Oh come, Billy, let us dance. If Christian will forgive us. Will you forgive us, darling? After all, Billy was my first friend here on Pinta. Billy, will you dance with me, to be polite?" She spoke so fast and seemed so unlike herself that I concluded she must have had quite a good deal to drink.

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"I'm afraid I don't dance very well," I said as I took her arm and led her into the big room.

"Oh, it's so bright in here," she said, leaning against me a little.

I was silent trying to follow the intricacies of the Latin American rhythms.

"Oh, Billy," she said, "I do hope you are going to be happy, too."

"Don't worry," I said.

"But I do. I would like to touch the world with a wand — and then the people would all be as happy as I, and everything would always seem as beautiful as it appears to me tonight. And I would begin with you, Billy. You can't know how wonderful — no, how extraordinary it is to have a chance to go back. It is the thing which all the wise men have considered impossible."

"I can imagine," I said.

"And to think what heaven it will be to have Christian with me again and to be able to complete in reality the plans that we made as children! There were so many things that he was going to teach me, so many places that he was going to show me. And now — isn't it strange? I will be showing them to him. Oh, but it's really very sweet. Oh, and Billy, when we are married, you must come and stay with us in Paris. For a long, long time. Do promise. For though I would love to go around the world with Christian, I would be perhaps supremely happy if I could only be in the drawing room of my house in Paris with you and Christian and

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Prince Sam — and then I would draw a line around us and no one would go in or out forever. But do say you'll come and I'll promise to let you out once in a while if you'll come back before too long . . . Perhaps next autumn?"

"Well, I'll try," I said, and stumbled over her foot. "I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe we'd better sit down."

I took Eliane back to the table outside. Christian had his back turned to the ballroom. He was leaning against a pillar of the porch, smoking, and it occurred to me then that despite Eliane, he still was a man invincibly solitary. He stood up as we came over.

"Have we been away a long time?" asked Eliane.

"A very long time," he replied. "I have smoked three cigarettes."

"Oh, I'm sorry for that," she said. A silence fell among us and I felt that I would like to excuse myself but I couldn't find the words.

"The night has been kind to you, Eliane," said Christian. "The island has never appeared so lovely. This is a night to remember us all by when you are far away."

"We will remember it, in Paris," she said.

"From my terrace at home now, you could see every wave in the sea, and the moon is shining so bravely it must light up Charlottetown across the water."

"Oh," she said, "I would like to see that, Christian. I would like to go to your house and see the waves."

"Would you?" he said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. More than anything, that is what I would like."

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"Well, I guess I'll go back and do my duty dances," I said, a little uncomfortably.

Christian and Eliane said good-by to me, and then, without going back indoors, they walked together toward the front of the house. When they had skirted the floor of grass which the moon lit like a ballroom, they leaned together. I turned and went inside. The room was almost empty. Between the walls spun the huge grotesque shadows of Rosella and Catbird, laughing uproariously as they twirled and pirouetted in a caricature of the dance.

"A waltz," boomed Rosella. "Just one more waltz."

It was, I thought wryly, a fine night for romance.

Chapter Ten

I WOKE UP with a splitting headache. It seemed to me at first that I was in the center of an insufferably strident discussion. I half sat up, to see no one — only the gentle swinging of my half-open door suggested that something other than the sun had entered my room. I studied this phenomenon with chagrin. Had I been too drunk to close it the night before, or had Miss Ada eased herself in on one of her unsolicited explorations? I pulled the covers over myself belatedly. Through the sunny gape of the door I could hear dimly the voices of my fellow guests and the untidy noises suggestive of eating. To my surprise, the conversation was

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punctuated by Catbird's raucous laughter. I felt queasy and still exhausted, but the puzzle of his presence forbade any further sleep, so I decided to ponder the conundrum in a cold shower.

Half an hour or so later, I returned to my room, dripping, and still disgruntled. The sight of Catbird lounging on my unmade bed, nursing a snifter of brandy and smoking one of my cigarettes, did nothing to improve my temper.

"What are you doing here?" I said crossly. "And look here — could you put out that damn cigarette? I feel like hell this morning."

"Screw down your valves, Billy boy. No offense intended," said my fat friend imperturbably. "And look what Santa Claus has brought you! Old Catbird never forgets his friends."

He made an expansive gesture toward the bureau where a tray waited, laden with bits and pieces of the noonday meal. Somehow his thoughtfulness only irritated me.

"I had intended to get something from Ophélie in the kitchen," I said ungratefully.

"Well, saved you the trouble, then. Anyway, I have to have a little chat with you."

"Can it wait?" I said. "I want to see the countess about something."

"Well, you'd have had to got up yesterday to do that. She went flying out, gay as a bird, while you were up here dreaming about Miss Ada. I guess she doesn't need much sleep. My agents tell me she didn't get back here until breakfast time.

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But, then, Christian drives up at noon and she's waiting right on the front stoop. I guess the sea air must be doing her good. She even said good morning to me today, and you and I both know she'd as soon stand around gabbing with the south part of a horse."

Since there was no alternative, I began to pick sullenly at the enormous meal Catbird had assembled. The peculiar way in which the edibles were grouped and displayed made me a little suspicious that, instead of asking Marie Louise, he had simply gone around the table scraping the plates.

"Well, what do you want to talk about?" I asked.

"Last night old Rosie and I hit it off pretty well. She did everything but give me the keys to the wine cellar."

"Was she at lunch?"

"Good Lord, no. Her black biddy tells me she never gets up before three. Guess she has to get a lot of sleep to keep that ugly. Anyway she left all the arrangements to me."

"What arrangements?" I asked.

"Oh, haven't you gotten the royal command? Anyway, Rosie and I are giving a little dinner — very *intime*, says Rosie — for Christian and the countess tonight. Very exclusive. Just me and you and them and her."

"I knew she was giving a party," I said haughtily, "but I didn't know *you* were coming."

"Coming! I'm practically the host! I'm digging up the champagne while Rosie dishes out the grub."

"You'd better wait and see if she remembers asking you before you start beating the bushes for the champagne," I

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said unkindly. "Anyway, how're you going to get hold of any?"

"It so happens I have a magnum or two stashed away in my safe deposit box at the bank for just such an occasion."

"If you're really invited."

"Invited? I keep telling you, I'm half the party. The Ada just about popped her eyes out when she heard. She was hopping around like she was doing the Virginia reel. Seemed to think I should get her an invite. *Her!* I tell you, Billy boy, old Catbird's star is shining bright at last. Why, with this kind of luck, I draw to a jack and get a full house."

"What kind of luck? Does it make your day to have dinner with Rosella?"

"More than my day, Billy, my lad. It makes my whole year. Just think it over. The perfect alibi. There I am, sitting with Rosella and her highness when the dog disappears. The countess is really in a squeeze because she has to leave tomorrow on the chugger. Everybody's crying and asking how come poochie vamooses. Then I find the little mutt under a cabbage leaf. Well, who knows? Maybe the Ada gets her sable coat. Anyway, Mr. Carleton B. Stanza gets to Miami, and what's more, he gets there in style."

"Well, but how do you get the dog? If you go up to the countess's room, everybody will see you. Her room's right smack at the head of the stairs, you know."

"Exactly, Billy boy, exactly. I don't leave the party even to pee. That's where the Ada comes in. This time she does all the dirty work. While you and me are rubbing elbows with

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high society, old Ada shinnies up the veranda. In she goes through the countess's window, and out she goes with a million bucks riding on the back of little Sir Rat. Just like candy from the baby."

"What about the maid?"

"Thought of that, too. About ten o'clock every night, Jeannette takes the mutt out for his daily petutin. Then she dumps him off and goes back to her own room. That's when old Ada Lee, the terror of the tropics, strikes again. I tell you, I can't miss. If she doesn't get the dog, at least she'll fall down and break her silly neck."

He gave me a look.

"You're not getting feathery about it, are you now, Bill? I promised I'd tell you about it, and now I've done it and that's my part of the bargain. Now all you've got to do is sing and do card tricks and anything else you can think of to keep the countess from noticing if Ada loses her foothold."

Whether it was because of my headache, or my disappointment at the countess's departure, or my growing cynicism, I don't know, but I could not help but feel a grudging amusement. It seemed to me that I was in the middle of an *opéra bouffe* and the idea of stealing Prince Sam seemed no longer horrifying, but harmonious with the invention of some outrageous librettist. I wondered how handsome the reward would be.

"Sure," I said. "I'm not going to interfere."

"Good man. We won't keep the beast any longer than we have to."

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Catbird invited me to accompany him to the beach while he got the champagne for the party, but I declined. Detached as I was, I still wanted to keep my role as passive as possible in the events which Catbird had outlined.

I dallied in my room a while, and then took a book to my accustomed chair on the veranda. In spite of myself, I found my eyes wandering from the page, and I wondered which of the posts Miss Ada would choose to ascend on her projected foraging expedition. Not one of the ones at the front of the house. Detection would be too easy. Probably one of the pair at the side in front of Rosella's room. For the first time, I noticed that each alternate post sported a trellis, trailing omnivorous looking vines. Probably those slats would support her. Indeed, it should be ridiculously simple.

The vines I had been watching trembled a little, there was a sigh of wind, and with no other warning, it began to rain — heavy sheets of tropical rain which hid even the painted gate from my eyes. I could see small branches and bits of foliage rushing clumsily westward, as if on the crest of a mighty wave. A new smell, half fresh, half old, old as earth mold, enveloped me, and I felt my spirits lift as if I had willed this rain to clear my head.

I laughed aloud at the idea of Catbird struggling up the cataract under the weight of his two magnums. I was standing on the edge of the veranda holding my hands out under the rare rain when unexpectedly I heard the noise of Dominique's taxi. A moment later, Eliane was thrusting her way through the downpour and up the steps. She was disheveled and

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beaded with water, but I could tell that above and beyond that, her ebullience had vanished and she was in a state of distress.

"Eliane," I cried.

She paused. "Oh, Billy," she said, "it's you. It is as though you were waiting for me when I need you most."

"Do you need me?"

"Oh — I don't know . . . I must change. I am soaked to the skin."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, I wish I knew . . . I must change . . . Oh, Billy, you must tell Rosella Christian is not coming tonight. He will not be here again."

"But he'll be going to Paris?" I said stupidly.

"No, no, no."

"I don't understand."

"I don't know. I don't know myself. I'll tell you later. I must change."

The water was still running down her face, but I could tell that mixed with the rain were her tears. She hurried by me and ran up the stairs.

"Do stop gawping, Billy, and come in," Rosella said to me brusquely. I had been summoned by Marie Louise before I had had a chance to change for dinner and now I stood at

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Rosella's doorway, feeling more than ever like a schoolboy about to be chastised.

"I'm afraid I'm not dressed," I said defensively, in case she thought I planned to attend dinner in my tattered trousers.

"Dear boy, you never are, but that's not a problem for me, thank the good Lord. Now I've asked you down on a very delicate matter. I've heard that Christian will not be here for dinner — some silly sort of lover's quarrel, I daresay, so we must just be twice as gay, so things won't be too dull for Eliane."

I scarcely heard what she was saying, so fascinated was I by the change in the tone of the room. The shades on the lights were now pink and pleated. A towering mirror in an ornate gold frame had been drawn from behind some curtains and leaned against a wall. Strangest of all was Rosella herself who strode about the room corseted into some semblance of a form (bosom, waist, and hips, although massive, were still demonstrable) in black velvet and, wonder of wonders, pearlless.

"You understand me, Billy? It must be gala. Now to pass on to another matter. I need your advice. It is always gentlemen who dictate these matters, and little though you may know about dress, you are still a gentleman. Now, Mr. Stanza tells me he doesn't care for pearls. 'My dear man, you are simply displaying your ignorance,' I told him. 'The pearl is the aristocrat among jewels.' Ah, well, perhaps I am old-fashioned. *Autres temps, autres mœurs*. But tell me, Billy,

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can it be true that in the great cities of the world, pearls are now thought quite passé? I have noticed myself that every little tourist has a string of shabby paste beads around her neck."

I saw that she was holding her pearls nested in the palm of one large hand.

"Oh, no. I don't think so."

"Ah, I knew as much. But what kind of jewels does Mr. Stanza care for, do you suppose?"

I saw now that her bureaus sparkled under a fine colored snow of stones — green, red, white, and blue necklaces, bracelets, earrings.

"I don't know exactly. Diamonds, I suppose."

"Oh, I should have guessed it. Diamonds are so obvious. Ah, well, it's probably just as well I wear them a bit before I wear out myself. Well, thank you, Billy. You might as well run along and dress. We're expecting you in the front room in fifteen minutes, you know. And remember — be gay."

More than a little astonished by this interview, I ran upstairs to change. As I was finishing my toilet, there was a knock on the door. It was not Catbird with an errand for me as I had feared, but Jeannette. She silently handed me a small envelope and retired. The note was from Eliane and it ran:

Dear Billy,

Since you already know what a coward I am, you will be not a bit surprised, I am sure, when I tell you I cannot go to Rosella's party this evening. Would you be so kind as to stop

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at my door on your way down? Perhaps together we can concoct a substantial excuse. I will wait for you.

E. de V.

I combed my hair and ran down the stairs. When I knocked on Eliane's door, she opened it immediately herself. I had prepared myself, I believe, for signs of sorrow on her face, but there were none. She was dressed in gray silk, her hair was drawn tightly back, her face was serene. She was, if possible, more beautiful than ever.

"Oh, Billy," she said, when she saw me, "how you are going to laugh at me. I have put you on a wild goose chase. Here I am, going down to Rosella after all. The minute I sent the note off to you, I felt how foolish I had been. Perhaps I am not a good guest, but Rosella will never notice I am sure." Then she smiled at me. "In any case, Billy, I am so glad you have come. We can go down together now. I have never become used to going to a party all alone."

When we arrived in Rosella's second sitting room, we found Catbird already there, and the party in such full swing that we felt like intruders. Rosella was infested with diamonds, and rocking with mirth, and the fat man was already sweating geniality. But they welcomed us as warmly as if our sober faces were no damper on the gaiety.

"Oh," Rosella gurgled, "now it's really a party." She clapped her hands, and the diamonds on her fingers and wrists flashed disconcertingly. "Another party! Quite like the old days! Oh, Eliane, you have made me young again! Whoever would have thought that I would be carrying on

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like this — lunches and balls and midnight suppers . . . It reminds me of a houseparty that the old Comte de Digne gave years ago . . . We all set sail from Nice on his yacht on Thursday evening. We were going to stay at his villa on the Île des Paumes — I understand his nephew has inherited it now and has turned it into a nudist colony. A lot of naked Germans sitting around drinking coffee and talking automobiles . . . Well, since there were more guests than staterooms, the old man brought along an orchestra and we all danced on the deck, and drank champagne. When we got to the island at dawn, there was the most frightful excitement. The villa had caught fire! We all rode up to the top of the hill, just in time to see the roof timbers fall to the ground . . . But old Hubert was the most thoughtful of hosts. He didn't say a word — just led us all down to his folly on the beach. His steward scurried about and brought us the most delicious suckling pig, which Elsie Wyndham insisted he must have roasted on the embers of the *boiserie* — then we all trooped back to the yacht and waltzed away till we got back to Nice."

"Weren't you tired?" I asked.

"Tired? Good Lord, no! I was never tired in those days. I never slept a wink. Still don't, as a matter of fact. Why, I remember the first time I met Freddy Albright at dinner in Paris. He took me home and on the way we stopped at a cafe for a *fine*. Well, he was such an amusing man — Jewish, you know, on his mother's side — but such fun. Well, we just sat there in our evening clothes, laughing and carrying on until

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eleven o'clock the next morning. You should have seen the concierge's eyes when I came in in the broad daylight in my ermine and parure . . . Oh, but he was so impudent! If I didn't know better, I'd think he was your papa, Charlie!"

Catbird chuckled. "Who knows? Maybe he caught my sainted mother behind the hay barn in a weak moment."

Rosella treated this like the very flower of wit. "Oh, my dear boy! I do hope you don't talk to *everyone* like this. Upon my word, most people wouldn't understand! Such impertinence!" And she chuckled happily.

Then dinner was announced, and we were led into an ante-room where two little dark maids, dressed in finery reserved for just such an evening, served us a meal of a Lucullan variety.

The conversation, however, was mostly Catbird's, and addressed to Rosella. He outtalked her and out-gestured her, and she seemed all too pleased to be so subdued. He told tales of triumphs at the gambling tables, which, try as she might, Rosella could not equate with the 'gaming rooms' she recalled so fondly and so often. He told tales of his grandfather's parsimony and his grandmother's myopia. He recounted the story of Miss Ada's attempt to marry a South American mining magnate. When he could think of nothing to say, he made playful grabs at Rosella's diamonds, which she parried with mock blows and whoops of laughter. Despite her gallant defense, I could not be sure that a brooch was not missing at the end of our meal.

After dinner, we had brandy and coffee, and conversation

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languished somewhat till Catbird offered to play the piano. He sat down and struck a chord.

"Good Lord, Rosie," he bellowed. "You don't tune this thing any more often than you take a bath!"

Both Catbird and Rosella cawed with glee, and as he pounded out ragtime, a kind of frenetic gaiety was superimposed on our evening. Soon the fat man turned to song and he bellowed out various comic ditties concerned with the coarser aspects of romance. Some of them were very funny and Rosella laughed immoderately. Even Eliane, who was at the far end of the room beside me, sitting as straight as a polite child at a concert, smiled occasionally. Then Rosella volunteered to sing.

"Carry on," said Catbird. "That is, if I can crank out the tune. But none of that opera stuff."

Rosella strode over to the piano and hummed out a simple air which he picked up easily. The song was "I'm Just a Little Country Girl Alone in This Big City." The delivery was professionally arch. There was applause all around, and Eliane said, "Rosella, do you know that it must be almost twenty years since I last heard you sing?"

"Is it indeed, my dear? Well, I was once thought, by those who should know, to have quite a fine voice, though heaven knows, anyone can tell I haven't used it much recently. I wonder, Eliane, if you remember this little song. It used to be such a great favorite of your mother's." Rosella consulted with Catbird, and then began to sing a very sweet little song in a sort of French patois. Then she went on to other

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songs she had learned in the islands. She was deep in a love song, one of the haunting songs I remember now as a background to my days on Pinta, when I noticed that Eliane had grown so pale, I thought indeed she might be about to faint.

"Are you all right?" I whispered.

"Oh, yes," she said.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Oh, Billy, no, nothing. Not even talk. Not even listen. It is best to listen to the music. I find I have nothing to say."

"I wish there was something I could do," I repeated.

"Can you call back time, Billy? There is nothing you can do."

"Could I talk to Christian?" I ventured.

"Oh, please, no. Do you know what he told me, Billy? He said that he used to dream that one day he would find me again and I would not have changed. And then it came true, but it was not our happiness, but our tragedy that it was so. But I don't want to think about it."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Do you know when I first came here I would not see him. I was right then, wasn't I? But this island has always meant my unhappiness . . . And I thought he would change. I thought I could make the most beautiful life for him. How could I have been so foolish, Billy? I suppose it is in that way that I have not changed."

The song had come to an end and the countess clapped automatically.

"Oh, don't pretend you were listening," said Rosella. "I

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saw you flirting with Billy. No matter. I have another little song I *know* you will enjoy, but I need my fan for it. I'll just run and find it." And she hurried off into the next room, bel-lowing for Marie Louise, while Catbird poured himself another brandy. I was sitting there, wondering how I could have been so selfish as to wish to deny Christian and Eliane their happiness and speculating wildly if any sacrifice on my part could rectify things, when there was a modest knock on the door and Jeannette made her unobtrusive entrance.

"*Madame la Comtesse*," she murmured, "*Le Prince Sam . . .*"

"Oh, yes, of course," said Eliane, rousing the dormant monster on her knee. "Sam, dear, you must go out with Jeannette now, and then you must go to sleep, for we have a long journey before us." The dog obviously regarded this suggestion with disfavor. "Go, go," she said and gave him a little push. Prince Sam scrambled to the ground, limped over to Jeannette, shot us all a baleful look, and made his exit.

"Yes," said the countess. "And I too must go to bed, Billy. I must rise early."

"No, no, Countess. You can't run off like this," cried Catbird, spilling some of the brandy down his shirtfront in his excitement. "The party's just warming up! Why, Rosie's going to bust out crying if you leave before her fan dance."

The countess looked at me and sat down again. Rosella returned with a huge ostrich plume fan and began to sing of the joys of the demimonde, but I could not listen. The im-

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plications of Jeannette's appearance had just dawned on me. In a little while — now, perhaps — Miss Ada would be starting her perilous ascent. I felt almost palpably the countess's unhappiness beside me. The secret of it had linked us all evening long in a kind of partnership of misery and I knew now that I was inhuman to have swelled her troubles by giving my tacit consent to Catbird's project.

Above Rosella's singing, each night sound came to me, clear and distinct, visible as colored drops in water. I jumped at each crackle and sighed at each false start. I heard Jeannette return Prince Sam to his room. I fancied I heard her shut the door of her own room, one flight up. Then it began — all the little anonymous noises I had dreaded and could not mistake — the scrabbling and the cracking of twigs. I looked at the clock. It was twenty past eleven. A vine snapped so sharply I expected the whole house to sound the alarm. But even the countess sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap.

The music had stopped, Rosella sat down, still waving her fan. "Now, Eliane. We have entertained you and turn about is fair play. You must sing for us."

"No, no, please, Rosella. You know I cannot sing — and besides, I am sure Mr. Stanza doesn't know the few silly little songs that I know."

I wondered if Prince Sam would bark.

"Stuff and nonsense. You always used to sing the 'Chanson de Marie Antoinette' for your mama. And I shall accompany — just like the old days."

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Rosella displaced Catbird and struck two chords with great authority. Eliane got up reluctantly and stood in the hollow of the piano as Rosella started to play.

"Tra-la-la-la-la. Tra, la."

Suddenly I could stand it no longer. I surprised myself as well as everyone else by getting to my feet and saying in a strange hoarse voice, "Eliane, you must come with me. I hear something in your room."

She paused and regarded me with surprise. "Do you, Billy? But I hear nothing."

"The wind," cried Catbird valiantly. "It's the wind. Play on!"

"No," I said. "I tell you, you *must* come."

Something of my urgency must have communicated itself to Eliane for she stepped towards me. Catbird gave a sort of a sigh and turned toward the piano.

"Well, there's nothing for it, Rosie my girl. How's for a chorus of 'Three O'Clock in the Morning'?"

Eliane followed me to the door as Rosella's quivering soprano joined Catbird's jovial baritone. Their voices marched behind us as we mounted the stairs.

"Now, Billy, what is it?" said Eliane, as we reached the landing. By way of answer, I flung open her door, praying we were not too late. The wind was whipping the curtains, the window was wide, and there, straddling the window sill was Miss Ada, her skirt hiked up above one narrow thigh, a flashlight in her hand.

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"Well, I declare," Miss Ada bleated, and as she fumbled to adjust her skirt with inappropriate modesty, Prince Sam fell to the floor and ran whimpering to Eliane.

"My God," cried Eliane. "But what have you been doing, you terrible woman?" And she leaned down and clasped the dog to her breast.

Miss Ada looked around wildly, made a strangled sound, said something like, "Beg pardon!" and scrambled back out the window.

"Oh, has she fallen?" cried Eliane. "Billy, do go look. I can't! I can't!" She had sunk in a chair, hugging Prince Sam.

"No," I said. "She's climbing. She's all right."

"But what was she doing, Billy? Why was she doing it? Oh, I am finally convinced that the world is mad . . . Oh, my little dog! And I liked her so much!"

She was crying into her handkerchief as I left, speechless, frightened of any further questions, and even more by her unhappiness. I was downstairs before I remembered I could not return to Catbird's mute accusations. I turned from the parlor and stumbled out on the porch and down the steps. I began to run and it was some time before I realized that my legs were taking me, not down to the beach I had shared with Catbird, but to the Trocadero, the scene of our first meeting. And run as I might, I could not escape the sound of voices twined into song:

*It's three o'clock in the morning,
We've danced the whole night through.*

Chapter Eleven

THE TROCADERO was overgrown with animated faces and redolent of rum and bodies. There was music, for it was Saturday night, and on the span of floor the couples collided dreamily. I could see no one I knew, but then I had purposefully circumambulated the space surrounding Christian's table. I knew within me that I had only to move my eyes a little to the left to find Christian in that spot that was now a blind spot in my eye. I turned and saw him. He had not noticed me, perhaps had not cared to. He was reading one of the papers which Murray left on a rack for the idle and the

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solitary. For the first time, I felt strongly that I had no desire for Christian's company. I went and sat on an empty stool at the end of the bar.

Murray was enjoying himself immensely. The Saturday night turmoil gave him a chance to be almost utterly officious. I had to wait until a comparative lull in the hubbub, when the band was taking a break. Then as his ferret eyes combed the room, I caught his attention and beckoned him over. He approached me ungraciously and made a few swoops with a cloth at the area surrounding my elbow.

"Well, kid," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Murray," I said, "I forgot to bring any money. Could I pay you Monday?"

"Sorry, Bub. As they say down here — '*Le crédit est mort.*'"

"*Oui. Compris. Les mals payeurs l' ont tué.*"

"Hey, Baron," he yelled at Christian. "Your pal here is broke in two languages." And chuckling offensively, he returned to the more profitable end of the bar.

"Look, Murray," I called vainly. "You know where I'm staying and everything . . ."

Murray narrowed his eyes at me wearily. "Get this, punk," he said. "I said *no credit*. That means N-O. No." And he pounded his fist on the bar with such emphasis that the forest of faces which had, until now, been purely personal swung to face me in the blank crowd of curiosity. I looked up to find Christian at my side.

"I wonder, Billy, if I could be of any assistance to you?" he said gravely.

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"Oh, no, not exactly." I said, greatly embarrassed. "I forgot to bring my wallet and Murray won't trust me."

Murray had hurried back to my end of the bar at the sight of my reinforcements, and now he temporized, "Sure, you know how it is, Baron. Nobody gets any credit. Christ, how'd I stay in business?"

"But Mr. Axel has been my guest, Murray," said Christian. "Surely you should have known that I would wish him to join me. You will join me for a drink, Billy, will you not? I am so sorry I did not notice when you came in. You see, I really didn't expect to find you here tonight."

I followed him over to his table, and we sat down. I was glad to be seated again. Even though I had failed to get a drink from Murray, I had had enough of Catbird's champagne to keep my head spinning.

"I didn't really expect to see you here either," I said. It came out more bitterly than I had intended, and I added quickly, "It's awfully lucky for me you are. It seems like you spend all your time rescuing me at the Troc."

He said nothing. Murray came over and I ordered a double Scotch. We sat in silence for a few minutes over our drinks. I thought gloomily of the hopeless muddle my life on Pinta had become. The countess would be leaving in the morning, and to add to all her other unhappinesses, she would probably think I had had a hand in trying to steal Prince Sam. Only Catbird would be left, and Catbird had every right to avenge himself on me for my perfidy. Suddenly I felt that the man sitting opposite me was responsible for my plight.

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He had made Eliane miserable. And if she had not been so miserable, perhaps —

"Christian," I burst out, "may I ask you a question?"

He looked up. "It is a truism, Billy, that you may always ask a question, but whether you will get an answer, and whether that answer will be enlightening — who knows?"

"Then you would rather that I didn't."

"I did not say that."

"It's a rather personal question."

"You have prepared me for that."

"Perhaps I'd better not."

"Oh, come, Billy, whatever it is, I daresay you would be more distressed by not asking your question than I would be by hearing it. I shall try to answer if I can. But personal questions are the most difficult to answer. After all, questions of decorum aside, how can I tell you if . . . for instance . . . I am a moral man? It is not in my province to know."

"Well, then, do you love Eliane?"

"That is a very easy question. One I need not ask *you*, as a matter of fact, for I know you love her too."

"That's not what I mean. Are you in love with her?"

"Yes, Billy, I have loved her — I was going to say from before the time you were born, but you must be very tired of that phrase."

"Yes, I am." I hesitated. "Are you going to marry her?"

"That is a bit more difficult, but I think that Eliane and I will not get married."

"Why not?"

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"Perhaps I should be like old Father William and allow you only three questions . . . Billy, I must admit that you have asked me a question that I find very difficult. I don't understand the whole answer myself perhaps." He paused and sipped his drink. "The question you ask touches on the center of my life and that is a hard thing to comprehend — and much harder to explain — especially to someone very young. Because you know that it is true that in spite of your unusual intelligence you are a very young man. You could not have asked me such a question otherwise."

"You mean I am unsophisticated?" I said, more curious than hurt.

"Unsophisticated? Good Lord, no. I meant to imply that you have not yet reached a time of life when certain things change. At your age, experience — excitement, if you like — is all. That is as it should be, and perhaps I envy you this a little. But as one slows down, often one looks less for adventure and more for contentment. Happiness is a complicated word, embracing a great range of degree and of variety. At my age, happiness consists partly of compromises — if you like, partly of unhappiness. To you, it is mostly made of ecstatic moments . . . But ecstasy is appealing only to the very young and the very miserable . . . It is alarming to contemplate too intense a joy. I have achieved what most men desire — a satisfactory pattern — and I am loath to disturb it."

"You have everything you want, then."

"Did I say that? That is not what I mean. I lack a great

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deal, though I have a great deal also. Chiefly, I lack someone to share my blessings with — But I am a man, and the blessings I share must be, for the most part, mine. You probably cannot yet understand what I mean, but soon, I think, you will."

"Do you mean that you can't share them with Eliane? She seems very appreciative to me."

"You are quite right, my friend. But she is unable to settle for my life, and I cannot accept hers. Oh, I am sure that if I went off to France with her, life would be idyllic. But I have not asked for an idyllic life. I am perhaps a little frightened of it. Because my life has passed beyond such pleasures. It is not easy for a middle-aged man — and I am, I think you would say, middle-aged — to taste the raptures of youth. We know that they are transient, we know that the cold gray day will dawn, and then where are we? So much farther from the beginning and, except in point of days, no closer to the end. It cannot be done, Billy, it is too much to ask." We were silent.

"I don't see what anybody could look for," I said finally, "more than to be happy. Even if it's only for a while."

Christian turned the glass in his hand and shook his head.

"Why is it, Billy, that we must occupy ourselves so much with this modern obsession, this searching for happiness. I may be a provincial man and very far from the real world, but not trade unions, nor wars, nor political tyrannies seem to me the curse of our present day — it is this moral dry rot."

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"I don't think it is so modern. Men have always wanted to be happy."

"Yes, indeed, but not as a principal objective. Not as the be-all and end-all. Perhaps it is the result of woman suffrage and all the unexpected things that that implies. Certainly it is most apparent in your countrymen."

"Well, if people didn't want happiness, what did they want?"

"Billy, you are forcing me to talk pontifically. They wanted it, as I said, but as a by-product of a more concrete search. Not just this aimless flight to a panacea. That, it seems to me, is our danger."

"Do you know what you are saying? You are saying that happiness is dangerous — You can't mean that."

"Oh, Billy, Billy, you are so literal-minded. Well, perhaps I do. Certainly, it would be dangerous for me to spend the last part of my life trying to catch the moonlight in a sieve. Despite what the poets say, a man cannot give up the world for love . . . And even if one could, even if I did, do you think Eliane would still love me?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Then I do not think you understand her nature. The joy which Eliane offers me — offered me, I should say — was dangerous to me. Great, great happiness is very demoralizing, at least to those of us who are not used to it. It saps the courage. The very happy fear death, which all men must face. They tremble at the thought of any change."

"But what if she felt the same way?"

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Christian gave a rueful smile and shrugged his shoulders. "Billy, I find it difficult to talk to you. We are speaking of two different women. Well, perhaps I can explain it to you in this fashion. I offered Eliane a life, and she, in return, offered me one. That sort of fair exchange is all very well in society — the giving of equal gifts — but it is not good with a man and a woman. I do not wish to enter an antifeminist argument, but suffice it to say that men and women are not exactly equal, and no sane man or woman would have it so . . . No, my friend, your kind of happiness is very destructive to the delicate balance of a satisfactory life — a balance which I have achieved, but not without cost. I hope I have answered your question now, for I have no more to say on the subject."

I had finished my whiskey and I ordered another.

"Well, maybe a balanced life is what you want, but I want more than that," I said sulkily.

Christian drew his attention back from a great distance. "I wish you well," he said. "But I cannot encourage you. You do not even have a name for what you want, just a cipher — it is for that reason that sophisticated men envy peasants. They want only a field, a house, a wife, a horse or perhaps, nowadays, a fine automobile. Simple words that mean something specific. It is not easy to have an abstract ambition. You would be better off if you wanted fame or money or power. I know that by the book that is sinful. But if that is what you want, and you want no more than that, at least the world holds everything you need."

Before my eyes passed all the glories of the world in which

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I could have no part. I buried my head in my hands. It was only nothingness I wanted: not to feel, to deny the complications of the body.

"I really don't want anything," I said. "I wish I were dead."

I felt Christian's hand on my shoulder.

"It is very late, Billy," he said. "We have both had a good deal to drink and if you will permit me to be impertinent, I think you have been here on Pinta too long."

Somehow I felt deeply disappointed by all that Christian had said to me, and I realized that I had hoped he would shed some light on my position. All he had done was to give me an impossible solution. The thought of going to another island, forcing another name, imposing myself upon new people seemed to me suddenly not an exhilarating game, but an intolerable burden. I wanted to ask for help, but what would Christian think if he knew me for what I was; an irresponsible child, masquerading under a manufactured name, and fabricating artificial relationships? Misery, bred of confusion, made me desperate.

"Christian," I said, "I can't go to another island. What shall I do?"

"What shall you do? My dear child, why do you ask *me* that? I do not wish to appear callous, but how can I tell you? You can see that it is all that I can do to manage my own life in my bungling fashion."

"But it is your own life," I babbled. "Mine is just a shadow. Even so, I've betrayed everyone. Even Catbird. Maybe I'm the first person who ever betrayed Catbird. I'm not Billy Axel.

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That's just a name I made up. This whole thing is a lie. None of you know who I really am."

"No, perhaps we don't, but it is probably none of our business. To me you are Billy Axel — After all, your name, any name, is only an accident, and as long as you don't forge someone else's, what difference does it make? I cannot believe that you are fleeing the police, so I assume you have good reason to use a pseudonym, like — well — traveling royalty."

"The worst of it is I don't know why myself. But I feel more real as Billy Axel than as me."

"Well then, Billy, let it rest at that. Few men indeed know themselves as they are. And as for betraying people, I cannot believe that either . . . I can only tell you, Billy, that experience is only valuable in what it teaches even if it is by accident or perhaps, especially if it is by accident. And if your little game has taught you something, then it has been worth the trouble. . . . Look at it this way. If you have dealt with us on Pinta honestly, then the other part of your existence doesn't matter."

"But I can't go on like this."

"Then, to elucidate the obvious, don't try."

"Well, what can I do then?"

"I can't be specific, but it is generally wise to begin at the beginning. If you can, as you have, carry off this unworldly existence, you can live a real life, too. The very young do not believe this, but the world of reality is far easier and far more rewarding for ordinary men — men who are not saints or

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poets. And if you are one of those, I imagine that there is no real world in the sense that I am talking of it."

"You mean I should go home."

"Yes, Billy — Or if that is out of the question, back to a life which you start with certain truths you can cling to; where your adventures are not imposed upon you . . . My God, what I suggest is not easy, really, is it? I am talking like an old, old man."

"Well, maybe I will," I said. The idea hardened in my mind and became possible. "Lord," I said, "I've got nothing to stay here for. I'd just as soon leave tomorrow. In fact I would if I could. There's only one thing. I don't think I could face going back on the packet with Eliane. I don't know why, exactly. It's just that my life here is over now. I haven't got anything to say to her really . . . I feel so sorry for her," I burst out.

Christian looked down at his hands.

"I think that Eliane is least to be pitied of us all, Billy. She is more sentimental than we are, and therefore more resilient . . . As for tomorrow, I could take you over to Charlottetown in my cruiser. It would take only an hour or so more than the packet and offer the advantage of a more palatable luncheon."

"Really?" I said. "Do you mean it?"

"I will pick you up on the quai at ten o'clock."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"It would be a pleasure for me, Billy. I have not been to Charlottetown for nearly three months now, and I will be

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able to return before nightfall. Now, shall we have another drink, or shall we go home?"

"I think maybe we should go home, Christian."

I wondered if I could stand up. To my surprise I found that I could navigate with deceptive ease. I followed Christian out of the Trocadero and only stumbled a little as he helped me into his car. I leaned back against the cushions.

"Christian."

"Yes," said Christian starting the motor.

"There are just two more things I've got to ask you."

"Mmmm."

"Do you think Rosella's pearls are false?"

"The great value of Rosella's pearls, to my mind, lies in the fact that they are one of those rare things about which whatever you prefer to believe, is true . . . What else, Billy?"

"Well, the other thing is," I said dreamily, "I never really will know what will happen with you and Eliane. I mean, maybe someday you'll get married, and I'll never know. What do you think will happen?"

"My poor boy, I've been talking to you all evening of nothing else. If I haven't made myself plain to you by now, it's late in the night to begin."

"But it's not *impossible*," I said.

"They say that nothing is impossible," agreed Christian.

"There you are," I said in maudlin triumph. "Things just don't happen without a reason. Everything means something. It just doesn't make any sense, that you should be so in

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love with Eliane, that you should never marry, and live here for years like a monk . . .”

“Not precisely like a monk, Billy,” said Christian smiling.

“Oh well, you know . . . and then all this should happen, and then nothing.”

Christian had drawn to a stop before the Crooked Mile. He got out now and came around to help me out.

“Billy,” he said as we walked up the steps together, “it is hard to accept the fact that in the real world, unlike the world of fiction, there are many things that happen that are truly irrelevant — so many clues are given us which mean nothing, and so many stories are begun which we will never know the end of. Never. I will never know the end of your story, Billy, and you will never know the end of mine.”

We had reached the door.

“Now good night, Billy. Sleep well, but not too long, if we are to start at ten o’clock.”

“Good night, Christian,” I said.

The Crooked Mile was entirely dark and I had to find my way up to my room by following the banister. When I got to my room I turned on the light, shut the door, and leaned against it. I felt again the wild elation I had known my first evening in the inn. I was free. But why was I free? Suddenly I felt the answer, separate from me, as a work of creation. I had taken an action that evening. And not an evasive action. I could take others. But there was something I needed now. Something was lacking.

It took me only a minute or two to open my bureau

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drawers and fling all my clothes on the floor. I sat down and laboriously went over every garment and through each pocket. It took almost forty-five minutes, but eventually I found the pawn ticket in the back pocket of a very dirty pair of white ducks. I took it reverently, smoothed it out, and put it in my wallet. If I went home now, I would still have two months to retrieve the pendant.

Chapter Twelve

I HAD TOLD Marie Louise to wake me early the next morning, for the countess's boat was scheduled to leave at eight-thirty. When she knocked, I woke immediately, feeling strangely fit and satisfied with my limbs after so short a sleep. I showered and dressed faster than my wont, all the time heartened by the strange new excitement. Only the fear of an encounter with Catbird marred a day which appeared to me now as blue and gold and shadowless as a primitive painting. I consoled myself with the thought that I would probably be leaving long before Catbird rolled out of bed. Perhaps I would leave him a note. Yes, perhaps I would.

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I ran downstairs expecting to have the dining room to myself, but the sound of voices drew me to a stop before the dining room door. Apparently I was not the only one up to see the countess off. I peeped in and was amazed to see Rosella reigning over the breakfast table, in the black velvet of the night before. Her only concession to a new day was the substitution of her famous pearls for the diamond encumbrances and what was obviously a newer and gaudier application of make-up over the ruin of the previous night's colors. She was pouring tea from a huge silver urn which I had never before seen in use, and Miss Floss, Mrs. Kungle, and Mrs. Bagby were hanging on her words. I decided to wait and get my breakfast later. I strolled out on the porch, intending to make for my accustomed seat, but I was brought up short by the sight of Catbird. He was lolling in my chair with his feet on the railing of the porch. His suit was shamefully rumpled and he was holding a champagne glass which he shook slightly from side to side as he sang to himself. Tiger was sitting on the porch steps regarding him with an almost superstitious awe. There was no time to retreat, for Catbird gave a howl at the sight of me.

"Oh, good morning, Catbird," I stammered. "I-I'm just going back in to get some breakfast." I couldn't look at his face.

"Oh, let it wait, Billy boy. It's not often you get a morning like this. Ought to sit out here and admire it . . . Are you just pulling up your straps now, Billy boy? Old Rosie and I saw the sun up, and you were still out on the howl."

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I hesitated by the doorway. "No," I said, "I wasn't all that late." Finally, on an impulse I came over and sat on the railing near him.

"Oh, Catbird," I said in an undertone. "I'm awfully sorry about last night."

"Sorry? Forget it, kid. We all do the way we do. Guess it was really a joke on me. Or rather on the Ada. Sainted aunt, if I could just have a snap of old Ada astride that window sill . . . I'd have given three fingers to hear her explaining *that* one away! I guess you and me are going to get the silent treatment for the next couple of weeks, though I don't guess that'll spoil your sun."

"Well, that's another thing, Catbird," I said, staring out down the road that would take me to the quai. "I'm not going to be staying around much longer. I mean, in fact, I'm going to be leaving the island today."

"Well, call the cattle home!" said Catbird wiping his forehead. "This calls for another drink." And he pulled a champagne bottle from beneath the chair. "Get yourself a glass, Billy boy. No? Well, gee, kid, I'll really miss you and that's the McCoy."

Suddenly his face lighted up. "Why, if you aren't Mr. John P. Sly, himself! So you're digging out with the countess! Christian and I do all the spade work, and then you run off with the big potato! Why, kid, you've got us all beat and all I can say is I wish you all the luck in the world."

"No, no," I said. "It's not that way at all. Christian is

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taking me over to Charlottetown. I'm not even going to see Eliane."

"Oh," he said, and examined the backs of his hands. "Well, I'll sure miss the gin rummy."

Silence fell between us.

"Look, Catbird," I said, a little awkwardly. "Since I've decided to go home so soon, I've got a lot of checks left over. I could let you have about seven, maybe eight, hundred."

Catbird shook his head gloomily. "No sale," he said. "I couldn't put the squeeze on a pal."

"Oh, look, Catbird," I begged. "Please do. You can pay me back some day, when you hit it big."

Finally he looked up. "I'll tell you, kid," he said. "Suppose I take five Cs and we'll call it square on the gin rummy debt. But not a word to the Ada."

I shook my head. Then something in his manner impelled me to go on. "Oh, Catbird," I broke out. "There's something else I've got to tell you. In case you ever come to New York and want to look me up, I mean . . . Billy Axel's not my real name."

Catbird made a gesture for silence. "Look, Billy boy," he said. "It's nothing to me who you are or any of the rest of it. Let's leave it the way it is."

"No," I said. "But I'd really like to see you again some day, Catbird." I told him my name.

He gave a delighted bellow. "Sure, Billy," he said. "Actually my name is John D. Rockefeller, and out in Hollywood you may hear the Ada referred to as Miss Lana Turner."

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"No, really," I said. "Really." There were tears in my eyes, I scarcely knew why. Something in my face must have convinced him, for he looked me up and down and gave a long whistle.

"You're on the ups, kid? The steel people?"

It seemed a long time since I had heard that question. I nodded. "You can see I haven't got much in common with the rest of my family."

"Well, call me a blue-nosed mandrill," said Catbird to himself, "and there I was, trying to marry the *countess*. Say the name again, my boy, it makes me feel rich."

Feeling very foolish, I complied.

"Sh, shh," he said. "Not so loud. Those five syllables are enough to bring old Ada right out of the woodwork, and then you'd never get off this island in one piece. Well, Billy . . . I mean . . . well . . . uh . . . Billy . . . I guess I don't feel so bad about that five note now. I can't say if I hadn't known, I wouldn't have settled for more, but what's done's done. Oops — Ten! Shun! Here comes the brigade!"

Miss Floss, Mrs. Kungle, and Colonel and Mrs. Bagby had assembled at the far end of the porch and now Miss Floss gave a sort of quiver and squealed. "The countess!" We all turned to look. The countess was standing in the doorway beside Rosella, looking very pale and fragile in her dark traveling clothes. Prince Sam was under one arm, and Jeanette followed, laden with coats.

"Oh, my dear Eliane," boomed Rosella. "It tears my heart out to see you go." They embraced, and when the countess

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moved away, Rosella's kiss was visible. I looked at Rosella and was surprised to see that the tears were streaming down her face. I stared rather rudely, amazed that those hard old eyes could store so many tears.

"Miss Floss, Mrs. Kungle," said the countess. "You have been so kind." The lachrymose mood was contagious, for these two good ladies promptly dissolved, and the countess made her adieux to Colonel and Mrs. Bagby. Colonel Bagby gave her a book to read on the boat, for which she thanked him very sweetly.

Then she approached my fat friend and took his hand. "Good-by, Mr. Catbird," she said. "You must try to forgive me for my injustice to you. I do not believe that you have ever meant to be unkind."

To my surprise, the fat man turned crimson, and said nothing at all.

"But where is Miss Lee?" asked the countess. "I should so like to speak with her."

Marie Louise was dispatched. A few minutes later Miss Ada made a reluctant and sour-faced appearance. She walked with a noticeable limp.

"Miss Lee," said the countess, and her voice was so low that only I, who stood so close to the door, could hear what she said. "I must beg you to forgive my anger of last night. I had not had time to think and it all seemed so strange. Oh, Miss Lee, I too know what it is to be lonely! I had wished to give you a present when I left, to thank you for all your kindness to me, but I thought this morning that I would give you

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after all something dearer than a present — my own little man, whom I know now that only you could love as much as I." She kissed Prince Sam on the ear and handed him to Miss Ada. "*Sois sage*," she whispered to him.

She looked at me. "Oh, Billy, Billy," she said. "I am sorry to leave." She threw her arms around my neck. Her cheek was cool and fragrant and wet with tears. But even as I held her, my mind was far, far away among the noises of New York. "Remember me, Billy," she said looking into my face.

"Of course, I'll always remember you," I said.

"Oh no, Billy, you will forget me. But we will remember you. Perhaps," she said, "perhaps someday . . ." Her voice dwindled off, she attempted a smile and hurried down the steps. She looked just once up the road toward the cliffs. "Good-by," she said. "Good-by, all."

As the sound of her taxi faded down the road, Catbird turned to Miss Ada.

"Why, what a handsome fur piece you've got there, Ada. Is that what they call sable?" He burst out laughing. "Well, live and learn. I never knew before the countess had a sense of humor."

Speechless and pale, Miss Ada hobbled over and thrust the dog into his arms. Then she hurried off into the house, slamming the door. Catbird stared at the dog in perplexity till, noticing Tiger's beseeching eyes, he leaned over the rail.

"Here, kid," he said. "You've always wanted a dog, and Murray can't say this one costs too much to feed."

And once again Prince Sam changed hands.

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Catbird turned back to the porch. "Well, folks," he said. "I guess all's well that ends well."

The last thing I heard as I went up to pack was the sound of the fat man's ribald laughter.

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